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JUST A WOMAN.



# JUST A WOMAN.

BY

MRS. EILOART,

AUTHOR OF

"THE CURATE'S DISCIPLINE," "MEG," "FROM THISTLES, GRAPES?"  
ETC. ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

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# CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

## *PART I.*

### CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
JERRY . . . . .	1

### CHAPTER II.

EDGAR RUDDFIELD'S HOME . . . . .	19
----------------------------------	----

### CHAPTER III.

AN OLD LOVE . . . . .	27
-----------------------	----

### CHAPTER IV.

HOW JERRY COMPORTED HIMSELF . . . . .	51
---------------------------------------	----

### CHAPTER V.

JERRY IN CLOVER . . . . .	72
---------------------------	----

### CHAPTER VI.

NORTH END HOUSE . . . . .	83
---------------------------	----

	PAGE
CHAPTER VII.	
CHRISTINE'S CARES . . . . .	103
CHAPTER VIII.	
IN DREAM CORNER . . . . .	111
CHAPTER IX.	
JERRY'S APPEARANCE AT RIVERSIDE . . . . .	136
CHAPTER X.	
WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN . . . . .	145
CHAPTER XI.	
CHRISTINE AT BAY . . . . .	169
CHAPTER XII.	
WEARY AND WORN . . . . .	205
CHAPTER XIII.	
JERRY AGAIN . . . . .	211
CHAPTER XIV.	
THE CRAVENS OF CRAVEN HALL . . . . .	229
CHAPTER XV.	
CHRISTINE'S PLANS FOR JERRY . . . . .	265

## PART I.



# JUST A WOMAN.

## CHAPTER I.

JERRY.

IT was the time of the first Great Exhibition in 1851, when we were all nearly twenty years younger than we are now ; when the Academy was in Trafalgar Square, located in shabby lodgings instead of its present palatial residence ; when bonnets were visible to the naked eye, and we wore our hair the colour nature meant it to be, instead of changing it every six months in accordance with the last new shade in red or yellow. We are twenty years older—whether we are twenty years wiser is quite another

126

VOL. I.

B

thing—since the bright June day when little Jerry sat on the steps of St. Martin's Church, with his toes out of his boots, his knees out of his trousers, his elbows out of his jacket, as ragged, saucy, dirty, happy an urchin as ever turned Catherine wheels in the hope of earning a penny honestly, or helped himself to a gentleman's silk handkerchief in the expectation of gaining sixpence from the old Jew clothesman with whom he transacted such dealings *not* quite so honestly.

Jerry was thinking about a handkerchief now. Not stealing it exactly—he could do such a thing, as I have hinted, having no scruples to stand in the way; and as to conscience, Jerry had never heard of such a thing, nor of some other matters with which it is generally supposed rather important that “immortal and accountable souls” should be acquainted. Jerry, indeed, would have been very much surprised if you had told him that he had such a thing as a soul belonging to him. Hands he had, and, as he thought,

knew how to use them; for as nobody had ever taken the trouble to teach him his Catechism, how could it be expected of him that he should know that part which inculcated the keeping such members from picking and stealing? Feet he had, nimble ones enough when they were not troubled with chilblains in the winter; and a back he had, badly clothed, and sometimes bruised with blows, but supple and vigorous enough; and eyes he had, as bright and keen and nearly as black as any London sparrow's; and a stomach he had, as poor Jerry knew very well, for just at the present time it was that stomach, ravenous and insatiable, that had had no fresh supplies offered to it since the preceding night,—when Jerry's last twopence had been spent on a saveloy and a penny roll,—that was urging him to see if he could not satisfy its cravings by helping himself to the red silk handkerchief that hung out of a gentleman's pocket who now stood within two yards of him.



Hands, feet, eyes, stomach—well, Jerry had got all these, as he knew very well,—sometimes, as regarded the stomach, to his cost ; but as to a soul, he had no more idea of such a thing than had any other of the little homeless heathen who twenty years ago swarmed in our streets, thronged our alleys, pestered our police, infested our parks, slept in our arches, came between the wind and our gentility, and grew up to be what they are this day,—a nation's curse and shame.

Twenty years ago Jerry, to all appearance, and thousands of others like him, were growing up to be the robbers and garotters of the present time—a fair harvest which has bravely ripened : just as now, others like Jerry are growing up in their turn to show us, by and by, how vile and base a thing manhood and womanhood may be under the kindly fostering care of our boasted civilization and our much-prized Christianity. Twenty years ! Looking back to what we have done for Jerry and such as he, I don't think

we have too much reason to boast ourselves of the progress we have made in some things, whatever reason for self-congratulations successive Exhibitions following in the wake of the first may show us. May we dare hope that ever a time will come when such as Jerry, by trade a thief, by habit a vagrant, to whom evil is second nature and wickedness natural as the air they breathe, will seem impossibilities as monstrous as the Hydras of old fable—or the imps that haunted monkish dreams? It may be so; but the work must move a little faster in its road to good than it has ever yet done, for such a time to be, not when twenty years but when five times twenty have run their cycle.

Jerry was very hungry. It was nearly two o'clock, and a quarter of an hour before he had been flattening his nose, in company with some other urchins of his own calibre, against the window of a cook-shop where rounds of beef, and plum puddings baked in tins, made the mouths water and the eyes glisten of the

hungry and penniless gazers. How often had Jerry rehearsed at that window the fable of Tantalus, and how often turned away as he had done to-day, resolved that the skill of his brain and the nimbleness of his fingers should before very long help him to something more than a sight of pudding. And he had perched himself on the steps of St. Martin's Church, though he knew it would not be long before his sworn foe, the policeman, would come by and tell him to move on, and was looking out for some fit opportunity of earning the pence that would provide his repast. The world was Jerry's oyster. Just now Jerry wanted to open it and dine.

Jerry was not in full dinner costume. The toilet was one collection of rags, and it was wonderful how they held together. Certainly, for the last three weeks, Jerry had worn them the whole twenty-four hours round, knowing that if he once took them off it would be impossible to induct himself into them again; and through the

rents and tears his brown dirt-grimed skin showed grimly. Cap he had none; he had lost it the last First of May as he climbed up an empty lamp-post where he might sit and watch Her Gracious Majesty proceed to the opening of the Exhibition. Jerry was very loyal in his way, and a determined sightseer. There was no spectacle of any importance in London that Jerry did not assist at after his fashion. He had hurrahed that First of May till he was almost hoarse, and descended from his lamp-post quite content with the loss of his cap in consideration of the excellent view he had had of the Queen and "her pal, and the kids."

But, looking at Jerry, ragged, dirty, dinnerless, and with no prospect of a dinner unless he could beg or steal the means of buying one, it seemed almost impossible to pity him,—he was such a picture of self-complacency, so thoroughly satisfied with himself and the world around him. Carriages and cabs whirled past him

with their gaily-dressed, pleasure-seeking occupants ; omnibuses loaded with sight-seers from the suburbs, or the country ; ladies leading children loaded with toys from that childish Elysium, the Lowther Arcade. Jerry envied none of them. They just formed the component parts of a show, and he was there to see it. Riders and pedestrians, ladies and children, they were moving figures in a panorama spread before Jerry's eyes for Jerry's delectation. Only, as he wanted his dinner, and that baked plum pudding in the cook-shop must necessarily be cold before very long, one or other of these living units in the show must be made to yield it to him.

Would that handkerchief drop of itself from the wearer's pocket, or must he give it a pull to help its fall ?

The gentleman who owned the handkerchief on which at present Jerry's dinner seemed to depend, stood by the kerb of the pavement in front of the Church,

waiting for a momentary cessation in the tide of traffic to cross to the other side, with the intention of proceeding to the Academy. He was slightly made, about the middle height, and rather under the middle age; fair wavy hair, thin delicate mobile features, a high though narrow forehead, a sensitive expressive mouth, and the shy unformed manner of a man who had lived too much either in his study or his *atelier*, hung too long over his books or his easel, to be altogether at his ease when out in the great world or mixing with his fellow-men. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield had lived in London the last ten years, and was much more shy of its crossings, much more annoyed by its crowds, more puzzled by the incessant ebb and flow of its ever-surfing tide, than was his cousin Launcelot Chastelar, whose life, with the exception of one short year, while he was completing his articles in the office of a great leading firm of London solicitors, had been passed in his little native old-world town of Arkleigh.

Mr. Chastelar was about the same age as his kinsman, but might easily have been taken for his senior by some years. He was taller and more strongly built, and carried himself well, looking, as is sometimes said, every inch a gentleman ; and there were a great many inches in Launcelot Chastelar. His face struck you at first as cold and impassive, but it warmed and improved upon you the more you looked on him, but what struck you most in the man, was the indefinable air of high breeding, which you would hardly have considered warranted by his position. But the Chastelars were of as good blood as any in Eastshire, and Launcelot Chastelar, like his father before him, never forgot that fact ; neither did any of their numerous clients, most of them the leading people in the county, who perhaps felt less confidence in the Chastelars as their legal advisers—though the soundness of their technical knowledge was never questioned—than as gentlemen, and members of a family that

for generations had married and intermarried with their own. It would have taken a great deal more than the noise of a London thoroughfare to disturb the equanimity of Mr. Chastelar, and he stood now, while one equipage after another whirled past, waiting for a brief lull as calm and as self-possessed as if he walked down the Strand in its hey-day every morning of his life.

There was need for caution, though. Each gentleman had a little daughter to take care of,—young ladies of between seven and eight years old, each dressed in her best, and highly honoured and elated by going sightseeing with her papa. One was pretty, the other plain. Jerry's quick eyes took that in at a glance; so they did the fact that one little girl was staid and self-possessed beyond her years, the other a little restless babyish creature, clinging to her father's hand, but not so restless or babyish as not to be perfectly aware of every admiring glance that was cast upon her; and they were a great



many : for Rosalind Chastelar, with her pink and white skin, her flaxen hair, and her blue beads of eyes, was what people call a "love of a child," and a great many ladies and some few gentlemen would cast more than one glance on the tiny face beneath the smart little blue silk bonnet.

She had a doll with her—a recent purchase at the Pantheon. The Pantheon *was* in those days, you will remember ; and with its birds, its conservatory, its gay counters, and its great picture on the staircase, with that never-to-be-forgotten figure of Lazarus, was, for children at least, one of the sights of London. And this doll was rather more than she could manage, being half as large as herself, and she would not, even while they crossed the road, trust her father with it. On this doll Jerry built great hopes. Its owner might drop it, but being good-natured he did not wish to rob her of her toy, besides it would be smirched and stained by the fall, but in the confusion the handkerchief might

fall out, or with her incessant movements she might drag it out on to the ground, in which case, once the gentleman had moved on, it would be Jerry's lawful property, without the risk attending his openly stealing it in mid-day; and in another moment things happened just as he wished them. Dolly nearly fell from her nurse's arms, and in trying to save her the handkerchief had a slight pull which brought it on the ground; and the whole party moving across the road, Jerry sprang from the steps and at once secured his booty.

Not so quickly, however, but that the keen eyes of a policeman were on him; but before No. 83Z could utter a word, Jerry had divined his danger, and was prepared to face it. "Ain't I a-goin' to give him the wipe, you moke?" he said, with superb and characteristic impudence, and dashed across the road under horses' heads and through a whirl of wheels with a celerity which he knew no policeman would dare to imitate. Just as he had reached the middle of the crossing, Mr. Ruddfield and

his friends were on the pavement, and Miss Rosalind Chastelar uttered a sharp shrill **scream** as she discovered that she had dropped her doll, and saw a glimmer of pink gauze and spangles and flaxen curls in the road, in imminent danger of being run over by a horse and cart.

Jerry heard the scream—it was loud enough, and saw Claude Ruddfield flying into the road,—for what purpose he could not divine. Claude did not care for dolls herself, and had refused in a very dignified manner a superb brunette in sky-blue silk which Mr. Chastelar had offered to present her with. But she sympathised with, though she could not understand, her cousin's love for the puppet, and instinctively rushed to save it. Jerry did not see the doll, but he saw the little girl and her danger, for the horse and cart were almost on her as he ran forward and threw her back towards the pavement almost from under the animal's legs, beneath which he found himself the instant after.

Mr. Ruddfield had seen his child's danger, and stood paralysed for a second. Mr. Chastelar had stepped forward to save her, but little Claude would certainly have been run over had it not been for Jerry, who was himself run over instead, and found the sensation, as I have once found it in my time, anything but an agreeable one.


Of course there was a crowd, and a momentary cessation of traffic, the driver of the cart protesting his innocence, and No. 83 Z, taking down his name and address, and Jerry was picked up bleeding from a cut with a stone, and his face and hands covered with wet instead of dry dirt, but otherwise unhurt, with the exception of feeling, for the first minute or two, rather more confused and bewildered, and more at a loss what to say, than he could ever remember having felt in all his life before. Rosalind Chastelar bemoaned her doll loudly; Claude clung, pale and trembling, to her father's hand, looking down ruefully at her soiled frock;

and Mr. Chastelar began questioning Jerry as to the extent of his injuries.

"Had we not better take him to the nearest doctor's?" asked Mr. Ruddfield nervously. "He has hurt his forehead, I am afraid, seriously."

"Bless you, sir," said No. 83, "the likes of him never come to harm. Just tell him to give you up your handkerchief, that I saw him pick up, and then let him go. I dare say he'll be run over again two or three times before the week's out."

"Warn't I a-goin' to give the gemman his wipe," said Jerry indignantly, "when the bloke here drove his 'oss right over me o' purpose. Here it is, sir, an' I hope you'll give me some-thin' for findin' it. Half the coves about here would have mizzled with it. Never mind *him*," he added, pointing contemptuously to No. 83. "He gets his livin' by chevyin' an' chasin' poor codgers like me. Now then, stow it, old blue bottle! Here's the wipe, an' I'm all right this time. Pickin' a thing



up that drops of itself ain't nothin' to be had up afore the beak for? Don't you wish it was now, eh, old un?"

And here Jerry put his tongue out of his mouth, his thumb to his nose, and winked with the one eye which was visible—the other was obscured with blood and dirt—at No. 83, who was about to express his indignation in no very measured terms at my hero's impudence, when Mr. Chastelar, rather weary of forming part of this very incongruous group, hailed a cab whose driver was listening delightedly to Jerry's eloquence, and lifting in the two children, turned to the boy, and was about to tender him half-a-crown, when Mr. Ruddfield, with unusual decision of manner, put his hand away.

"I will see to him. That's *my* affair," he said hastily. "Take the children home, I'll follow presently."

Then, giving a shilling to No. 83, he asked that guardian of the peace to procure

another cab; which being done, Jerry was desired, much to his astonishment and delight, to get inside, and Mr. Ruddfield followed. The cab drove off, and Jerry, exulting in the dignity of his present position and his escape from the clutches of No. 83 Z, leaned from the window, and raising his thumb again to the tip of his nose, waved a parting salute to that vigilant but indignant officer.

## CHAPTER II.

### EDGAR RUDDFIELD'S HOME.

THE two cabs drew up before a small old-fashioned house lying back in one of the secluded lanes of Brompton. There were green trees about it, and hedgerows on either side, and a small garden in front. Altogether it reminded you pleasantly enough of the country, much more pleasantly than any part of Brompton can do now, when the last few hedges that remained twenty years ago have been replaced by brick walls, and the trees that here and there still lingered, the last of their kind, have been either cut down, or else absorbed in one or other of the miniature gardens



at the back of the many new palaces of Stucco-ville.

Mr. Chastelar and the children alighted before the small gate. Mr. Ruddfield and Jerry followed, and the cabs drove off. A pretty but faded face looked from a bedroom window up above, and Mr. Ruddfield, glancing towards it, caught the look of alarm that swept across the small delicate features as Claude, dirty, tumbled, with torn frock and bent bonnet, a woeful contrast to what she had been when she left the house two hours ago, emerged from the cab.

"There's Maria!" he said hurriedly; "I hoped we should have got into the house without her seeing us. I must go and explain matters to her as soon as I have spoken to Gibbs."

But Gibbs, whom the noise of the two cabs, an uncommon occurrence in the quiet lane, had brought to the door, seemed to think that some explanation was due to her when she saw Claude's face and dress. She

was a sharp-featured little woman, with a waist like a wasp's, and a temper, too, when provoked; exquisitely clean in her lilac print and white cap; and she filled the post of cook and housekeeper in Mr. Ruddfield's house; Mrs. Ruddfield's constant ill-health causing her to devolve the whole of the domestic management upon Gibbs.

"A pretty pickle you're in, Miss," Gibbs began, "and clean and smart as hands and pins could make you when I sent you out."

But here Mr. Ruddfield interposed.

"Gibbs, please to take this boy into the kitchen; let him wash his face and hands, and then give him something to eat."

"In my kitchen, sir!" said Gibbs, eyeing Jerry askance. More than once before now, Mr. Ruddfield had annoyed her by the hospitality he had thought fit to evince to his models; she had been required to entertain a crossing sweeper and an orange woman, and had done so under protest; but anything so dirty, ragged, and disreputable-looking

as Jerry had never yet entered Gibbs' own domain, and she felt a natural reluctance now that its penetralia should be invaded by such unworthy feet. "In *my* kitchen," she repeated, looking round appealingly; and then, glancing again at Jerry, said with ineffable scorn, "He's not fit to be touched with a pair of tongs."

"I don't want you to touch him with tongs, Gibbs: soap and water will do a great deal better," said Mr. Ruddfield meekly. Nominally he was Gibbs' master—virtually, she was his mistress. But now and then he made a faint show of authority, and he was disposed to do more than make a show in the present instance. Jerry had, it was possible, saved Claude's life. He had certainly been run over in her stead, and his little girl was much too precious to Mr. Ruddfield for him to under-rate such a service. He had learned a little about Jerry during their drive in the cab,—just as much, that was, as Jerry chose

to tell,—and had been powerfully impressed with his chronic destitution and present hunger; Jerry, seeing that he had a “soft un” to deal with, having painted his position in the saddest colour, and, the savoury remembrance of last night’s saveloy notwithstanding, solemnly affirmed that it was full two days since he had swallowed a mouthful. The first thing then to be done for Jerry was to take care that he should dine, and with this end in view Mr. Ruddfield continued:

“He has saved Miss Claude from being run over. That accounts for his present appearance and hers too. I think, Gibbs, when you remember that, you won’t mind having him in your kitchen.”

“And what took you in the road all alone, Miss Claude?” said Gibbs severely. “Well, well, some people ain’t to be trusted with children no more nor if they was babies themselves;” and with this side thrust at her master, Gibbs was about to usher Jerry into her sanctum, prepared to treat him with

tolerable civility, when he brought her anger on him for other reasons than his dirt. He had been standing by Claude, for whom he had quite a fellow-feeling: perhaps it was that she, like himself, looked in her present condition so out of keeping with everything and everybody about him; perhaps it was that Claude's grey eyes had rested kindly if curiously upon him, while Miss Rosalind Chastelar's face had expressed nothing but contemptuous wonder that such a dirty, ragged boy could be in the world at all. And all the while Gibbs had been indulging in disparaging remarks at his expense, he had been after his fashion taking stock of her, and the returns were not altogether satisfactory. He liked Gibbs not one whit more than she liked him, and his feelings found audible vent in the remark uttered in a whisper to Claude, quite loud enough for every one to hear, as his eyes were fixed with a close, critical gaze upon the housekeeper, "She's got false hair!"

If there was one thing Gibbs believed in, it was her front. If there was one thing she wished everybody else to believe in, it was that those brown crisp curls, with the wonderfully natural parting down the middle and the narrow black velvet crossing just to hide where art met nature, were the growth of her own head instead of being furnished her by the hairdresser and done up every week, and sent home crisp and fresh in a long shallow paper box at the cost of threepence. Her eyes flashed fire at this attack upon her cherished tresses, the more especially as Miss Rosalind Chastelar laughed outright, and her father smiled.

"Howdacious little beggar!" she cried, and boxing Jerry's ears pushed him towards the kitchen, on the principle perhaps of filling his mouth with good things to prevent worse coming from it.

"I'll go and see Mamma," said Claude, "and tell her I'm not hurt;" and she went away, gravely and softly, to her mother's room,

while her father conducted Mr. Chastelar to his studio.

"I'll leave you here while I go and explain matters to Maria. She's easily alarmed, and I saw her face at the window as we arrived. You haven't seen Christine's portrait yet? They wouldn't have it at the Academy, and accepted one that I think far inferior. Portrait painting isn't my line, but I think I've succeeded here."

And he turned a picture whose front was to the wall so that Mr. Chastelar could look on it, and then went his way to Mrs. Ruddfield's room.

## CHAPTER III.

### AN OLD LOVE.

IT was not a beautiful face, the one on which Mr. Chastelar looked intently and curiously, but years ago the original had stirred his pulses to the quick, and even now its painted semblance had still some power over him. It was not beautiful, this face of Christine Ruddfield's, but it won upon you more the more you looked at it, and made you feel that the owner of that face must be a woman well worth any man's prizing, either as sister or as wife.

Edgar Ruddfield knew her value as the one—Launcelot Chastelar had done his best to win her as the other. Looking on the



face before him, it seemed as if it could not be ten years since he had been told that there must be an end to all the hopes and dreams with which he had identified it, that of *his* home that face would never be the sunshine ; that Christine Ruddfield would still be his good friend and cousin, but never anything more ; ten years since their paths had parted—since she had put him out of her life and went on her way alone.

He had loved her very dearly—more so, he had found when the time of parting came, than he had imagined, and he had accused her of coquetry and heartlessness when she had told him that of that love there must be an end. They had been children together, Launcelot Chastelar's mother having been a Miss Ruddfield, and the anticipated marriage between the cousins had been projected by the elders of the family as an equally desirable thing for both the young people ; Christine Ruddfield, besides whatever share of her father's fortune he might bequeath her in

common with his other children, having had what in those parts was reckoned a very fair fortune for a young lady in her position, bequeathed her by a widowed aunt. The Chastelars were better connected than the Ruddfields, having county blood and county connections to boast of, Mr. Chastelar senior having been the fourth son of Hubert Chastelar, master of a small old-fashioned hall in a village just big enough to claim a place in the county map. But that was enough to give him a position in Arkleigh such as no other solicitor could hope to obtain. Gentlemen liked to consult him, he was one of themselves. The Chastelars were of noble Huguenot descent, and had come to England in the time of Elizabeth. A son of the house had married an Eastshire heiress, built Bonne Foi Hall—since corrupted to Bon-foy—in the tiny village of Snout's Trotting; they have such euphonious names sometimes in this part of the world—and so had founded the present family. They

had never been territorially of much importance in the county, but they had married and inter-married, and so had strengthened their position and influence, if they had not increased their wealth; and as Raoul Chastelar—they liked these old Norman names; the founder of the house had been a Raoul—found that he had no vocation for the Church, not stamina enough for the bar or the navy, and heard that his father could not possibly maintain him decently in the army, it was thought a very sensible way of turning the family connections to good account when he elected to become articled to the leading solicitor in Arkleigh, and in due course opened an office of his own, and taking one of the best houses in the town, married Miss Ruddfield, who brought him five thousand pounds, and all her brothers, cousins, and uncles for clients.

This was a great match for the young lady. The Ruddfields held a good position in Arkleigh, but this was the first time

they had allied themselves with the blue blood of the county. They had been bankers, brewers, doctors, clergymen, but had kept themselves rigidly aloof from retail trade, and had thought much of themselves and their position, and all Arkleigh had thought much of them too. They might be styled the *haute bourgeoisie* of the small town, but still they *were* bourgeoisie, while Raoul Chastelar was of the untitled gentry, and could trace back his origin to Norman nobility. And it was said that there had been a time when the Ruddfields had been only Rudds, and that the first recognized ancestor of the house, who had begun life in a small huckster's shop, had enlarged his name as he increased in wealth and importance and became a small landowner. So, on the whole, it was thought a great thing for the Ruddfields when they allied themselves with the Chastelars; and old Simon Ruddfield, the grandfather of both Christine and Launcelot, would have been very well


pleased to have seen a similar alliance repeated in the second generation.

He had originated this idea, and the parents of both the young people had approved of it, so that Launcelot and Christine had come to look upon themselves as betrothed, without any direct love-making on the gentleman's side or any formal promise on the part of the lady. Simon Ruddfield died before his grandson was out of his teens; then just as Christine was entering womanhood her father and mother were both swept away, and the virtual head of the family was her elder brother, John Harrison Ruddfield—Harrison after his maternal grandfather, through whom the Ruddfields had come into much wealth. They were always enriching themselves by their connections, and John Harrison followed in the ways of his fathers,—married sensibly, if not brilliantly, the daughter of a banker in Stunington, and went on living in the picturesque old many-gabled house by

the river, and near the brewery which his great-grandfather had erected; and suggested to his brother Edgar that they should unite their capital, and start a branch of the Great Oxwell bank, of which his father-in-law was chief. He only wanted Edgar to give a little supervision and invest his money; he would have done the rest himself; and Mr. Smithers would have been very willing to have seen his bank represented in Arkleigh by Ruddfield Brothers.

But Edgar did not accede to the proposition; he had no turn for business, he said, which his brother knew very well. His father had destined him for the Church, but Edgar had expressed doubts about one or other of the famous Thirty-nine, and hesitated about the Nicene Creed, which had annoyed the old gentleman so much that he had taken him from College, and set him down to a desk in the counting-house of the brewery till he should shew what it was that he was fit for. Then, Mr. Rudd-


field dying, Edgar was his own master with an income of two hundred a year, arising from money in the funds, the same sum which his father had bequeathed to his sisters ; the bulk of the property, the two farms near the town, the brewery, the old-fashioned dwelling-house, the small public houses in and around Arkleigh, and a very handsome sum in the Funds, having been willed to John Harrison. In the last two generations the Ruddfields had made eldest sons, and the precedent was followed in the third. John Harrison accepted his position, as his father had done before him, as a matter of course. It was very pleasant to be an eldest son, and it was only right of his father to make him one, and he would do his best to raise his family and himself. He would work hard at the brewery, and by and by perhaps represent his native town in Parliament ; and then he would build a house a little distance from the town, and throw all the fields of Little Whils farm into one good-



sized park: he looked lovingly already on the elms and oaks growing here and there into stately trees, which by and by would look as well, when the long lines of hawthorn between them were levelled and the ditches filled up, as if a hundred years ago the little Ruddfields, or Rudds, had played beneath them. He hoped his wife would give him children—sons especially; and by and by they should be something more than townspeople, and mate—there was no knowing—with even higher people than the Chastelars. Meanwhile, he would do his duty to the full by the younger branches of his family; not one of them should have reason to complain of their chief; and it was really with a sincere wish to benefit Edgar, and a conviction that the scheme would be the one most likely to cause him to turn his small capital, and what John Harrison firmly believed to be his small talents, to account, that he had suggested the project of the Bank.



Edgar was just two-and-twenty at this time. His sister Alethea was a year younger, and so her own mistress, and Christine between nineteen and twenty—all three very fond of one another, and a little in awe of John Harrison, who was six-and-twenty, and old and grave for his years. Therefore, when Edgar not only declined to join his brother in the bank, but announced his intention of going to London for the purpose of commencing his career as an artist, it was no wonder that both the girls were anxious to go with him. John Harrison thought his brother mad; neither artist nor author had yet appeared amongst the Ruddfields; but he could do no more than persuade him against the course he wished to adopt, and persuasions in this case seemed useless. Edgar had resolved upon going. He was free now, and he would chalk out his life for himself. Generally speaking, he was quiet, timid, and apparently irresolute, but there were times when, like most quiet men, he could be what his sister



Christine called "firm as a rock," and his brother John Harrison "obstinate as a mule." He would have nothing to do with either bank or brewery ; he would be an artist or he would be nothing ; and so the elder brother let him have his own way, just because he could not help it.

On the whole, he thought it better that Alethea should go with him. She was a discreet, well-behaved young lady, without a particle of genius (John Harrison devoutly thanked Heaven) in her composition. She would be likely to keep him from going very far wrong, and would be certain in no way whatever to go wrong herself. But Christine was another matter. John Harrison was a little afraid of, and for, his bright, wilful younger sister. He would have liked her to have stayed with him and his wife, in the old house by the river, till the time of mourning for her father had elapsed, and then with all proper state and show marry Launcelot Chastelar. But Christine


was wild to go to London. Let her have one flight, she pleaded, before her wings were clipped for ever. All her days by and by would be spent soberly enough in the old town with Launcelot Chastelar: might she not see a little gaiety, a little of what the world was like beyond the hills that hemmed in Arkleigh, before she settled down in it for ever? If Alethea went, why not she? Alethea, everyone knew, was a born duenna—might be trusted to take charge of a nunnery, abbess and all—surely she could take charge of her as well as of Edgar. And so, sorely against his better judgment, the elder brother let her have her way, and she left Arkleigh and was lost to Launcelot Chastelar for ever.

He waited for her in the old town. He was very fond of her, but he was not a man to be very ardent and impetuous in his love, and he no more doubted her than he did himself. When he could spare time he went up to London to see her, and found her brighter, handsomer, and more winning than

ever. She had entered heart and soul into Edgar's pursuits, and when at the end of a twelvemonth her lover asked her to return to Arkleigh and become his wife, she refused on the plea that she could not leave her brother. "Alethea is very good, and propriety itself, as every one in Arkleigh knows, but in practical matters she is nearly as helpless as Edgar. And he wants to go to Italy, and I want to go with him, partly on his account—for Alethea is one of the incapable ones of the world—and partly on my own; so Launcelot dear, *dear* Launcelot,"—to this day he remembered the thrill that one word and the tone in which it was uttered had given him,—“try and persuade John to be a good brother, and let me go.”

John Harrison was very wroth when this request was conveyed to him. He was a thorough Englishman—the Englishman of a small middle-class provincial town; and if he was prejudiced, like so many of his kind and class, against all artists either with pen or

with pencil, looking upon them in much the same light that his ancestors had regarded the strolling players who had visited the little theatre of their town, he was still more prejudiced against all foreigners and foreign places ; and he was Christine's guardian, as well as the trustee of her property ; so that matters were looking awkward for her projected flight into Italy, even though Launcelot Chastelar unselfishly urged him to consent, when Alethea opportunely fell ill, and was ordered by the physicians to winter in Florence. It would have been the height of barbarity not to allow her sister to accompany her, more especially as Alethea declared that nothing but Florence could save her life, and accordingly Christine had her way. They went to Italy—first to Florence, then to Rome—where Christine attained her majority, and signalized it by announcing her intention of not returning to England till Edgar did so. And she did not even then. He married abroad, the daughter of a fellow-



artist, and went with her to London, where they set up a small *ménage*; and six months after he had done so, Christine, who had remained behind with her sister (Alethea declaring that she could never breathe the fogs of England), wrote to Launcelot Chastelar breaking off their engagement. She gave no reason, but the simple one that she was wiser and older than when she left him, and that her increased knowledge of the world had taught her that he and she would be better apart:—"In which case we shall always be good friends, which we shall certainly not be if we become husband and wife."

Launcelot remonstrated eagerly and passionately. His letters ought to have moved Christine, coming as they did from a man to all outward appearance so cold and impassive that few credited him with any warmth of feeling; but whether they did so or not, none ever knew. They failed of the effect desired. She wrote back to him

kindly but firmly, and then he retorted angrily, like one who has a wrong to complain of. In effect he had one. All his life he had looked forward to making Christine Ruddfield his wife, and now for some caprice she chose to break with him. He considered himself an ill-used man—not without some reason—and it was years before he could bring himself to forgive his old love because she would be his love no more. He married after a time—sensibly and prudently—the daughter of a neighbouring rector, with no fortune, but very good connections. He brought her to the handsome red brick house in the town which his father newly furnished for him, and then vacated, preferring to reside in a house two miles distant from Arkleigh, which with its pleasant grounds he had lately purchased, and whence he drove daily to the office in as handsome a carriage and pair as the good people of Arkleigh ever saw. One child had been born to Launcelot

Chastelar—the Rosalind the loss of whose doll had been the means of introducing Jerry to Linden Cottage—and he had led, on the whole, a tolerably pleasant life. His position in the town was a very good one; his practice had increased till he had to enlarge his offices, and double the number of his clerks. He had lost his mother, but his father was still living, hale and vigorous as ever. He had many friends: perhaps John Harrison Ruddfield was the most intimate of them. His little girl was pretty, lively, and engaging; and as to his wife—well, as to his wife, looking even upon Christine Ruddfield's face he could not help owning that he had no reason to complain of her.

Only, it does not meet all a man's requirements, the having no reason to complain of his wife: though it is just possible that had he married Christine Ruddfield she might have given him a thousand reasons, and in spite of them he would have loved her just



a thousand times better than he had ever done the lady who now bore his name.


He was able to look upon Christine Ruddfield's face with sufficient calmness to be critical. If this portrait were a correct one, and the air of life and truth about it convinced him that it was, she had altered with the years that had passed over her, but the change had been little for the worse. It was not a beautiful face, as I said, the one he looked upon, but it was a very handsome, bright, and winning one. Christine Ruddfield was now over thirty, and looked her age, for her figure was full even to stoutness, but this tendency to *embonpoint*, which she had had from a girl, was only in keeping with the character of her beauty—nay, to some seemed rather to enhance it. She was fair, a warm, glowing fairness, with rich carmine lips, and cheeks whose rose-tints were crimsoned a little deeper by the sun; and she had deep, dark, bluish-grey eyes—honest, fearless eyes, and yet with a latent tenderness

underlying them ; a broad open forehead, and masses of bright fair hair, the true inimitable gold that twenty years ago no one dreamed of altering by soda bleachings or chemical blanchings—gold that surrounded her face in massive rolls, forming a glorious framework for it, and was gathered at the back under a dark net. It was the fashion at that time of day, and much too becoming to most faces for it to last, and it was especially becoming to the face of Christine Ruddfield. Perhaps the nose was not perfection, and the mouth was certainly too large to be so ; and the cheeks, though rounded and dimpled as a girl's, might be too full for some tastes ; but you forgot all these minor shortcomings in the genial, loveable expression, that won upon you the more the more you looked.

If you were a man, and fancy free, you would feel as you gazed that there stood the woman who might make any heart happy as a wife ; if blessed with a wife already, then you would think that you would have rejoiced had fate

given you such a sister. And if you were a woman, you felt as you looked that there stood that other woman of whom you could have made the dearest, truest friend in need or sorrow that ever need or sorrow asked to help them.


But the great charm of the face—and it was a singular charm for a face to possess that belonged to one who, like Lily Dale, might have written O. M. after her name—was its motherliness. It was difficult to look upon it and realize the fact that Christine Ruddfield had to all appearance vowed herself to celibacy; for wooers had come, and wooers had gone, and she was Christine Ruddfield still; but to see her portrait, you would have fancied that its proper complement was some handsome schoolboy bringing home his prizes to show his mother: by and by you could picture the original of such a face sending her son forth to fight for his country, loving him dearly, but loving his honour more; glorying in his renown if



he lived, and if he died, with all her tears, glorying yet more. Christine Ruddfield's face was that of a mother of boys—hereafter to grow up into brave, true men. You would credit her with being loving and tender enough to daughters too if she had them, but with the strong, bright nature of such a woman you felt that she would have rejoiced and gloried most in sons. And to all appearance neither girls nor boys would ever nestle in Christine Ruddfield's rounded arms, lay their heads on her bosom when trouble or sickness came, or come home exulting at the triumph won, and that they had her to share it with them. And, looking on that face, with its sweetness and its strength, its tenderness and its pride, Othello's words would involuntarily recur to you, and you would say, "The pity of it, Iago! oh the pity of it!"

Mr. Chastelar felt something like this as he looked upon the portrait of the woman who should have been the mother of his

children. And yet there were indications even in this face, that its original was not all sweetness and tenderness. There was a lurking mischief in the corners of the mouth, a latent fire in the eyes, which those who knew Christine Ruddfield fully understood. Mr. Chastelar was not too sure, as he looked upon her, and remembered some phases of her career since they had parted, that she would have been altogether the best wife for him in the life that had been chalked out for him at Arkleigh. He almost smiled as he pictured her in the little country town, running counter to every prejudice of her class, ignoring the very pretensions she should have most regarded, satirizing the things that everybody else appeared to hold in the most respect, treading, figuratively at least, on the corns of every one of her acquaintance; and, in a country town, Mr. Chastelar's belief was, that on every toe of every foot every one had at least a dozen corns. She would have held her own after



her own fearless fashion—no doubt of it; quite as well, to say the least, as his wife had ever done. And she would have been liked, very much liked, by a great many people—those, perhaps, whose liking was best worth the having; and a great many more would have hated her with all their little souls, and perverted every heedless word, and misinterpreted every careless action. She would have made fun of his best clients—as likely as not to their faces; snubbed the county magnates; and spoken not too respectfully of those in high places. She would not have been a safe wife, altogether, for him; Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar, flat figured, and thin voiced, with manners as stiff and as unimpeachable as her drawing-room curtains, and words as duly measured as a medical prescription, was a great deal safer; and yet, looking on the face before him and recalling that presiding over his home, Launcelot Chastelar, correct and unimpeachable as he was in all the outward proprieties of life,

could not help heaving just a little sigh, and wishing that safe things were pleasant ones, or that at any rate, if they could not be so, that one at least of the unsafe things had fallen to his share.

## CHAPTER IV.

### HOW JERRY COMPORTED HIMSELF.

EDGAR Ruddfield came into his studio looking much less harassed and anxious than when he had left it. "I have made Maria easy. She was terribly alarmed when she first saw the state Claude was in, but that is all over now ; I have satisfied her that there is nothing amiss with the child : indeed, she has had her in, and satisfied herself. And now I have come to talk to you about the boy who saved her."

"Give him half a crown and let him go. That will be quite enough for him. I dare say he will be in prison next week."



"If I don't prevent it I think it's not unlikely," said Edgar Ruddfield gravely ; "and how to prevent it is just what I want to talk to you about."

Mr. Chastelar sat down, and prepared himself to listen. No chance of going to the Academy that day. Edgar Ruddfield had one of his crotchets in his head, and there would be no escaping from him till he had dilated on it at full length;—well, there was Christine's portrait to look at, which was some consolation.

"The little unfortunate has neither father nor mother, and was starving when we brought him into the house;—by the by, I hope Gibbs has seen well to him," said Edgar Ruddfield anxiously ; "if you'll excuse me a minute I'll go and see how he's getting on."

Mr. Edgar Ruddfield left the room, and his cousin amused himself with looking over the Catalogue of the Exhibition.

Jerry was getting on very well. His host

need not have disquieted himself at all on his account. Gibbs had taken him into the scullery, vowing that he should not set a foot in her kitchen, but this scullery was so clean and cool that it was a perfect paradise after the dens of dirt to which Jerry had been accustomed. Like the kitchen, it was on the ground-floor, and looked out into the bright little garden at the back of the house, so that there was a vista of purple and white lilacs and green leaves and yellow laburnums before the window ; and as to the floor being stone, and the walls whitewashed, with a general feeling of dampness pervading the place, that only added to Jerry's sense of comfort. The day was very warm, and the scullery was deliciously cool, and after washing some of the blood and dirt off his face with water from the tap, Jerry sat down on an inverted tub with the knifeboard before him for a table, and addressing Gibbs said, " Now, old un, look sharp : I'm peckish."

Gibbs tossed her head in silent indigna-

tion, then gave Jerry a mutton bone with a fair quantity of meat upon it, a thick slice of bread, and told him to eat it, and "hold his impudence."

Jerry nodded and commenced eating, then, when Gibbs was looking another way, cut off a huge slice of the meat and hid it, with half the bread, amongst his rags; then addressed Gibbs—"Haven't you got anything more for a fellow? That wasn't a mouthful."

Gibbs lifted up hands and eyes, and then gave him a plate of ham; after doing so, she went into her kitchen, which opened out of the scullery. Jerry hid best part of the ham, and was about to call out for more, when Claude Ruddfield made her appearance in the scullery.

She was neat and trim now, with smooth hair and white pinafore, and a grey alpaca frock. She had been to her mother, and had calmed her incipient hysterics by protesting that she was perfectly safe and un-

injured, and then she had found some picture-books for Rosalind Chastelar to amuse herself with, and next had bethought herself that it was her duty to see how Jerry was progressing. She had been watching him for at least a minute before he saw her, and now she said gravely, "What made you hide that meat about you?"

Jerry felt a little ashamed. He would not have cared for Gibbs a bit, but something in this prim, grave, quiet little girl, with her large earnest eyes and her pale plain little face, made him feel rather uncomfortable. For once, Jerry forgot to tell a lie, and spoke the truth.

"I hid the grub 'cos I didn't know when I should get any more; and I've got a pal as is bad with the fever, and ain't got no stummick for the like o' polonies or fried fish, which is the best he's able to get now he's laid by. I thought maybe a bit o' meat like this would go down: we don't often get sich in our parts."

"Meat is not good for people in a fever," said Claude oracularly: "I'll ask Mamma to let you have some arrowroot for him. Now, have you had enough to eat yourself? I know papa wishes you to have a good dinner. Here's some cold gooseberry-pie, and semolina pudding: would you like a little?"

Claude had opened the door of the pantry as she spoke, and Jerry, catching a sight of the dainties she named, nodded his readiness to partake of them. She helped him liberally, undeterred by Gibbs, who insisted that both pie and pudding should be left for supper. "Papa wanted the strange boy to have a good dinner," said Miss Claude with unruffled calmness, "and I never consider I've dined myself unless I've pastry or pudding; and you know, Gibbs, we generally have both."

Then she gathered up her little frock, and perched herself on the edge of the sink, where her father found her when he came down to see after Jerry.

"Claude, dear, this is not quite your place," he said, but if there was a shade of reproof in the words there was none in the tone, and Claude answered him as if she were his equal in age,—“No, papa, of course not; but I thought it only right that either you or I should see that the strange boy had a good dinner. Now you’ve come, I’ll go back to Rosalind.” She moved towards the door, then turned back:—“I really don’t know what we *shall* do with that child unless we get some toys to amuse her.”

She might have been eight-and-twenty, instead of eight, years for the tone and manner in which she spoke of her cousin. And the incongruity was quite lost upon her father. He considered Rosalind Chastelar a spoiled child, and was very thankful that, with his wife’s ill-health, he had not one like her; but after another fashion he had spoiled his own as much to the full—spoiled her for a child at least, which, all things considered, and remembering that we can only be chil-

dren once in our lives, is perhaps the saddest spoiling of any.

Mr. Edgar Ruddfield satisfied himself that Jerry was going on comfortably, and then again commending him to Gibbs, and charging the boy himself on no account to leave the house till he had spoken again with him, returned to his studio and Launcelot Chastelar.

"I hope Gibbs will look after your spoons," said that gentleman, laying down the catalogue. "I shouldn't like to trust your *protégé* near my pantry. By the by, has he returned you the handkerchief to which the policeman accused him of helping himself?"

"He picked it up, so he tells me, and was coming after us to return it when the accident took place. What a fortunate thing I dropped it," added Edgar Ruddfield fervently. "To think of what might have been, if that boy had not been crossing the road after us!"

"Or trying to get himself lost in the crowd, and so escape the lynx eyes of the police-

man," said Mr. Chastelar. "That fellow really did seem to have some notion of his duty. He evidently knew our young friend downstairs quite well."

"I dare say he did—poor little wretch! Please God, I will prevent his being ever so known again. Now, Launcelot, can't you help me in this matter. This boy has saved my child, and if possible I must save him."

"Get him into a reformatory if you can—that's the only chance for him; but I don't know that he'll thank you for the chance. He is one of the wild creatures that infest all great cities. He would rather starve on his liberty, than grow sleek and fat in what he will feel to be a prison. You may try him, if it is any satisfaction to yourself, but I doubt whether the experiment will succeed."

"I will try and pay my debt, at least," said Edgar Ruddfield, "but it shall not be by placing him in a reformatory. I think, with you, the necessary discipline and restraint would be too much for him to bear. I



should like him, if I could, to begin a new life altogether, far from anything that may remind him of his old haunts and habits. It's the best chance of making him a new creature."

"You'll never do *that*," said Launcelot Chastelar. "For how many generations have the gipsies dwelt among us, and yet they are untamed and lawless still. How long will it be before we have assimilated and civilized them? And this creature comes of an infinitely lower race than they. Is there anything viler and more degraded than the street Arab of which he is a type? Do you think there ever was a time when the forefathers of this brat used their hands to any honest purpose? Thieving, lying, and blasphemy have all been born with him. I believe if you had taken him from his cradle you would never have made of him what you are trying to make of him now. If you will so overrate the service he has rendered your child—(I don't see myself why being run over should

have hurt her a bit more than it has hurt him)—why, try and return it, but do it in the easiest way. I dare say, with a little trouble and a little expense, you'll get him into one of those places where they attempt to turn young rogues into something like honest men. Hand him over to these experts. As I've said, he won't be very grateful—perhaps he'll run away, but at any rate you'll have satisfied your conscience, which it's always worth taking a little trouble to do."

"I must satisfy it, but not in that way, Launcelot. I want you, as I said, to help. Couldn't you get him into the Grey Coat school at Arkleigh, and find some decent woman in the town who would take him in to board? You've interest, I know, and there are plenty of workmen's wives who would be glad of such a help in their house-keeping."

"And such a well-behaved inmate as your young friend. I wonder how many times a week I should be asked to call him to order,

and to look out for other lodgings for him. Don't you see, Edgar, it's only shifting the responsibility from your shoulders to mine? Do you expect me to vouch for his respectability and general moral character?"

"Well, perhaps I am asking too much. If you'll only get me the nomination to the school when you return, I'll bring him down with me. I have promised Christine to go and see her, and I can stop at Arkleigh, on my way to Stretton. Then I'll look out for a home for the boy, and leave him there; though what I shall do with him in the meantime," said Mr. Ruddfield meditatively, "is more than I know: I'm afraid Gibbs won't like his staying here."

He looked wistfully to his cousin for a little encouragement. The great difficulties he was prepared to encounter—the expense, the trouble, the responsibility; but this minor obstacle rather appalled him, and Mr. Chastelar did not seem disposed to give him any encouragement.

"I don't think she will," he said; and as if to confirm his words a scuffle was heard in the passage, and, the door opening, Gibbs entered, dragging in Jerry. Then she shut the door as if to prevent his egress, and flung him from her with such force that he fell flat on the floor. Then Gibbs began to recount her wrongs at his hands.

"The owdacious little beggar! I caught him at the larder a-stuffin' in the custards I'd made for missis as fast as a cat laps milk; and there's no end to his imperence, for when I rated him for stealin' he turned round and told me they was uncommon good, but wanted a little more sugar. I'll sugar him, an' so I told him; an' then he began flinging every saucepan he could lay his hands on at my head, so I've brought him here, sir, just to say that either he or I leaves the house this minnit; and if I'm to have such muck in my kitchen, why, the sooner you look for another person in my place the better."

Jerry had picked himself up meanwhile,

and stood looking as innocent as he knew how, and then he began his tale with an injured air.

"She wouldn't give me no grub: I asked her for more, an' she flew out at me like winkin'. Then I went to help myself to a mossel, for I had had nothin' to count on from her, an' she scratched and tore at me like a good un—yer know yer did, now," he added, turning to Gibbs. "Yer've lost yer own appetite with tight lacing, so yer can't abear to see a fellow as don't give in to sich nonsense enjoyin' his vittles like a Christin."

Jerry put his tongue in his cheek and winked at Gibbs, and the housekeeper indignantly rushed forward, and seizing him by the collar shook him with such force that Jerry's booty, consisting of sundry slices of mutton and ham, a great piece of Yorkshire pudding, and two thick slices of bread, fell out. She pointed to them triumphantly. "There! that looks as if I'd stinted

him! Abominable little liar! and to hear him one would think I hadn't given him a mouthful. Oh, you little vagabond, a nice bringing up you've had!"

Jerry was equal to the occasion. If Claude had been present he might have felt a little discomfited, but he had not stood in the dock before a Bow-street magistrate over and over again for nothing. He looked at the fragments on the floor, and addressing Gibbs, said, "A nice mess you've made of 'em!"; then turned to Mr. Edgar Ruddfield—he did not feel quite so sure of his ground with Mr. Chastelar—"An' if I did put some of the grub away, I stinted myself to do it. I've got a pal down with the fever, an' he's a wife an' nine children, an' not a bit o' vittles have they had between 'em the last two days; so I thought there'd be no harm in taking them a mossel or two if I went without, myself, to do it; an' now the old 'un there has been an' made it in sich a state that as like as

not it'll turn their stommicks when I gives it to 'em."

Part of Jerry's story was true. He had an immense amount of good-nature: *that* was born with him. Lying, thieving, and effrontery were necessary accomplishments in his mode of life. He might practise them as much as he pleased, and yet be as ready as ever to help a friend in a strait, or divide his dinner with one who would else have been quite dinnerless. He really had an acquaintance ill with a fever, and only the preceding night he had been very much distressed because he could not prevail upon him to share his saveloy and penny roll. But as his friend was only ten years old, I think we may be allowed to doubt his possession of a wife and nine children.

Mr. Chastelar walked towards Miss Ruddfield's portrait, an amused smile on his face. Mr. Ruddfield looked puzzled and distressed. What should he do with the boy?—not by and by, but now. He had no fear for Jerry's

future. He was a thief and a liar, but that was only natural: better things would come with better training. But where should he bestow him till he could take him down to Arkleigh? To keep him in the same house with Gibbs was not to be thought of; and how else could he be taken care of, and kept from his old companions for the next few days? Jerry settled the matter, and did the very best thing he could possibly do under the circumstances, by falling on the floor in a dead faint.


That cut on the forehead had been rather a worse one than either of the gentlemen had imagined, and he had been a good deal bruised by the fall, but the subsequent excitement had kept him up for a while; and he had eaten a great deal more than under the circumstances was good for him: this, combined with Gibbs's rough usage, produced the effect of which I have spoken, and Jerry now lay prone and helpless on the studio floor.



"He's shamming," said Gibbs. Then she looked at him critically. "No, it's real—he's gone off, sure enough. Done it o' purpose, little vagabond, just to aggravate me!"

She emptied the contents of a jug of water on his face, then slapped his hands vigorously, but to no effect. Then she looked up at her master. "Hadn't Mary better fetch a cab for him to be taken back to his friends?"

"He has none—poor little wretch!" said Edgar Ruddfield, looking compassionately on the thin, wasted child that lay before him. He was only a child, after all; even Mr. Chastelar saw that, now he lay still and helpless, with his saucy tongue as still as if it would never utter another word of slang. Such a miserable little creature! So small and slight, with such a pinched wan face: just a waif, and against him all society had arrayed itself. And Jerry in his turn had set his small strength against society's, and had already begun to wage a war in which sooner



or later he would be certain to get the worst of it. Only, looking at Jerry now, so small, so pitiful, one could have no thought of the possible burglar, the not impossible murderer, the fore-doomed felon, with the hulks and the prison for his birthright, with the gallows looming darkly in the background. You could think of nothing, see nothing, but a miserable half-starved child who had done his little best to save another child, and now lay bruised and helpless there, a victim to his own good deed.

"Got no friends!" said Gibbs. "And I doubt whether they'd take him in at the hospital; and as to the workhouse, I wouldn't send a dog there if I'd only half a bone to give him. Got no friends! No wonder he don't know how to behave himself better. He's a' comin' to—Lord love e'e, child, don't hold my hand so tight!—and he kept Miss Claude from being run over, you say, sir? To think of it, a child like that! There's some good in him, with all his sarce."

"Yes, he saved Claude," said Edgar Ruddfield gravely, "and, Gibbs, if possible we must save him. Can't you help me?"

"Well, in the way of taking care of him till he was better, I might, sir—but when he is better, there'll be no living in the same house with him."

"If once he is well, Gibbs, I shall take him away, and put him to a good school."

"The best thing for him. He'll never come to no good else. I shouldn't mind looking to him a bit. There's the loft over the outhouse, we might put him there. I'd easy make up a bed, and see to him between whiles."

All this time Jerry was holding Gibbs's hand very tightly in his own. There is no knowing how much that mute unspoken appeal might have had to do with her sudden benevolence. Then he opened his great eyes again, and looked at her very fixedly for a second, and giving a great sigh closed them again and went off into another faint: upon which

Gibbs intimated it to be her opinion that "some gentlemen would do much better to go for a doctor than to stand with their hands in their pockets, a lookin' on, and not doin' any 'versal good whatever."

## CHAPTER V.

### JERRY IN CLOVER.

JERRY'S fainting fit had happened very opportunely ; Gibbs's sympathies were enlisted in his favour, and she at once took charge of him. She made him very comfortable in the room over the outhouse, and the beef-tea and arrowroot with which she plied him were miracles of sick cookery. But Jerry did not recover very rapidly. There was nothing infectious in the disease, which made Claude's father easy as far as she was concerned, but it was a long, low fever, born of bad living, foul smells, and dirt. And Jerry was so happy during his illness that he had no very great wish to recover. It was so pleasant, lying in the loft, with the

sweet summer air stealing in through the tendrils of the honeysuckle which grew thick and close around the little window; there was no one to scold or swear at or kick him; and Gibbs, who was for ever flitting in and out of the little room, would have been a ministering angel in his eyes if Jerry had ever known anything about ministering angels. Mr. Ruddfield came very often, and Claude also, the latter evidently as a matter of duty. The poor boy wanted some one to see after him, she said, and Gibbs had a great many things to do besides attending to him. She brought him flowers out of her own little garden, and when he grew a little better, tried to talk by way of amusing him, and looked carefully over her books in the hope of finding one that would interest him. But it was so difficult, as she told her father, to find anything to talk to him about. Jerry and she not had many subjects in common, and he sometimes seemed quite at a loss how to understand her. He liked her,

and was losing his fear of her, and beginning to tell the truth more than he had ever done in his life; but, on the whole, she was as incomprehensible to Jerry as he was to her. It was the difference in the bringing up, he supposed, and he told her so one day. Claude agreed with him, and then asked him if he remembered his mother.

"Never had one that I know on," said Jerry. "There was an old woman as sold apples as used to call herself my granny, but she died, oh, ever so long ago. I wasn't sorry. I got none of the apples but the rotten uns, and whenever they didn't sell she used to bang me about like anythink. I got on by myself, after she was gone, pretty well."

"But you must have been very young to earn your own living," said Claude gravely. "How did you do it?"

"A fellow showed me a thing or two," said Jerry evasively, "an' the neighbours warn't so bad. There's Joey Todgers—well, he does cut up rough when he's lushy; he

gave me this mark on the side of my face,"—and Jerry showed a rather deep dent in his cheek—"shying a pewter pot at me; but he's often good for a drop of beer or a penn'orth o' pudden. He's not a bad un, once you're used to him. It's only his way, you know."

"I don't think it's a nice way," said Claude. "He must be rather a strange person, this Mr. Todgers! Is he in trade? What is his business?"

"Well, they *do* say he's a cracksman," said Jerry, "but he keeps it very quiet if he is. I know he's been in quod two or three times, but we don't think much of that our way. I know he's a deal of blunt at times. I on'y wish, when I'm bigger, he'd bring me up to his line."

"I don't know what a cracksman is," said Claude, "but I shouldn't think Mr. Todgers a nice person. I wouldn't go to him to learn a trade if I were you. You know it wasn't at all proper for him to fling the pewter pot at your head."



"It didn't hurt long," said Jerry, "an' he guv me some gin and bitters the next day."

Then he began to turn restlessly in his bed, and Claude smoothed his pillow and straightened his counterpane, and then resumed her seat at the foot of his little couch. Gibbs had contrived to make the loft look quite comfortable. It was merely used in ordinary as a lumber-room, but she had stowed the more unsightly things compactly away in a corner, and brought in a chair or two and a strip of carpet, so that to Jerry's eyes at least it was all that could possibly be required in a bed-chamber; and he lay now looking with unutterable satisfaction around him and then at the trim little girl at his feet.

"Shall I read to you?" said Claude. "I think that would send you to sleep, which is what you want. I read to Mamma often. It composes her, she says: shall I try and compose you?"

"All right," said Jerry; "go along!"

Then Claude read. Jerry understood not a word. But the voice was pleasant and the reading fluent. Miss Claude Ruddfield had been able to read the *Times* aloud before she was six years old. Since then she had read any and every thing that came in her way. Her father had a tolerably large and very miscellaneous library. He was always buying books. He liked the old poets—Massinger and Forde, Ben Jonson and Dryden, and the old novelists—Fielding, and Smollett, and Richardson. Claude had access to all. Her father never thought of stinting or training her literary appetite: Claude was free to browse where she would: but somehow this indiscriminate browsing did her wonderfully little harm. Just at present she was reading Scott steadily through—first one novel, then another: she was now engaged with the "Lady of the Lake," and gave two or three of the most stirring passages very well indeed, and with

decidedly more force and emphasis than might have been expected from her staid little face. But it all helped to "compose" Jerry. He did not know, and he did not want to know, who Blanche of Beven, the Knight of Snowdon, and Roderick Dhu were, but he listened to their names, and the cadence of the rhymes, in a quiet dreamy placidness. If Jerry had ever heard of heaven, which he had not,—although very often of another place to which a great many good people might think Jerry himself was hastening very fast indeed,—he would certainly have thought that it must be something like his present room; it could not possibly be better; and that the angels' voices were very like Claude Ruddfield's. He fell off to sleep with a smile on his lips, and Claude, closing her book, looked at him with an air of profound interest, and then went her way, saying to herself, "I shall certainly tell Papa that whatever he does for this poor boy he must take care he has

nothing to do with that very bad man Mr. Todgers."

Rosalind Chastelar and her father had returned to Arkleigh three days after Jerry's introduction to Linden Cottage. Claude was not at all sorry to part with her cousin. She had hunted up all her old toys for her. Her aunt Christine had given her a great many, but even she had failed to teach Claude how to play with them, but they had come in very handy, as she said, for Rosalind. "You can have them every one," she said to her, "doll's house and all: I haven't played with them since I was quite a little girl."

But it was a great relief to part with Rosalind—who could scarcely read, had never heard of Scott, and knew nothing of Shakespeare—and not to be expected to take an interest in dolls and their dresses, and make believe at being a grown up body with a large little family to take care of. Rosalind was very clever at this make-believe, but

Claude found great difficulty in entering into it. She did her best, but she was immensely bored, and could hardly help showing it, and on the whole, though she did not understand Jerry, she found him a much more congenial companion than her cousin.

It was a strange, unnatural life Claude Ruddfield led. Since she had been able to talk the one great duty of her life had been to keep quiet. Her mother had fallen into a weak state of health two years after her birth, and Edgar Ruddfield, in his nervous solicitude about her, had forgotten that noise and play and laughter are almost as necessary to the healthy growth of childhood as food and warmth. He was too fond of Claude to bear to part with her; she seemed happy enough, and thrived and grew in that hushed home with her mother's illness for ever before her. And Mrs. Edgar Ruddfield was a querulous, exacting invalid, a woman wrapped up in her own ailments to the exclusion of everything beside;—a selfish

woman from her birth, whom illness rendered doubly so. And her husband saw nothing of it all; the one anxiety of his life was lest in anything he should fail in the care and tenderness his wife required at his hands. He need have had little fear; Mrs. Edgar Ruddfield was quite able to remind him if in anything he fell short of the care and solicitude she considered her due.

If Claude had gone to even a day-school it would have been infinitely better for her, but her mother scouted the idea of her doing so. There was not one in the neighbourhood sufficiently select for Mr. Ruddfield's daughter, so she had a daily governess, a pale faded gentlewoman who had seen better days, and made a hard living now by going about in all weathers from one pupil to another, and Claude learned a great deal from her—more, Miss Atkins declared than she had ever taught a pupil of her age—and was her father's friend and companion, and her mother's nurse, and Gibbs's

pride and wonder; if only amongst them all they would have ever given it a thought that at eight years old the best thing for a child to be is simply to be a child, and nothing more.

## CHAPTER VI.

### • NORTH END HOUSE.

PERHAPS the most important personage in the little town of Stretton, numbering altogether eight thousand inhabitants, was Miss Christine Ruddfield. Certainly she was the one who made her presence the most felt, and socially and intellectually, and in fact, to sum up all, æsthetically exercised the greatest influence over its affairs. How had Stretton existed before Miss Ruddfield took up her abode in it? It had dragged on some sort of a life certainly, had its merchants, its lawyers, its doctors, its mayor, and its one banker—Stretton never knew what it was to have two of the latter dignitaries resident there; its town hall, a very primitive build-



ing, and its town council, an equally primitive set of men; its one church, and its four chapels; but it had been looked upon and had looked upon itself as a place of very secondary importance in the kingdom, not at all to be compared to Arkleigh with its increasing commercial importance, or to St. Ewald's with its county traditions, its old families and its faded ancestral glories, till Miss Christine Ruddfield took up her residence in the commodious red brick house dating from the time of Queen Anne, at the further end of the town, which had been bequeathed her along with five thousand pounds in the Consols by her late great-aunt, the widow of George Timmins Esq.


The little town was proud of her. Miss Ruddfield was a personage. She had won for herself a name and a repute before she came to reside in it, and that name and repute were magnified greatly in Stretton, which at once identified Miss Ruddfield with itself, and exalted her greatness accordingly. And

this greatness was not so very great after all—she had written a volume of poems, and a novel or two, which were rather better than the average of young ladies' poems and novels, and accordingly had been favourably received by the public, and praised, on the whole quite sufficiently, by the reviewers. But Stretton people had done very little to distinguish themselves from the common herd—their literary achievements as yet were *nil*, and they were disposed to think a great deal of a real live authoress when she came to settle among them. They were flattered by her doing so,—looked upon it, almost every man of them, as a personal compliment to himself, with which the very comfortable old-fashioned red brick house with its faded but plentiful plenishing had nothing whatever to do.

Miss Christine Ruddfield had now been a resident in Stretton for the last year. Before that time she had lived first in Italy and then in London, during which time she had published the different volumes which made

Stretton think so highly of her, and had made several acquaintances of a different order to any she was likely to meet with in the country town. She had brought her elder sister Alethea with her, but Alethea was scarcely a perceptible presence in Stretton, Christine eclipsed her so completely; and the two ladies had settled down comfortably enough in the old red brick house which Mrs. Timmins and her old servants had inhabited during the many years of the lady's widowhood.


It was a solid, roomy place—a house that seemed as if it should never have been inhabited, first by a childless widow, and then by two single ladies. It was plainly built, straight and square, with a door in the middle, two windows on either side, and five both on the first and second floors. And it turned its back on the little town, like a house that stood upon its gentility, and whose owners thought themselves entitled to visit with some few at least of the county families. It stood sideways, flush with the road, at the extreme end of



the principal street of Stretton, and looked full down the open country, through which the long high road wound pleasantly enough. There was a small kitchen garden at the rear of the house, with a few fruit-trees, old-fashioned ones, such as ancient country gardens love—mulberry and medlar and quince, the Norfolk biffin, and apples whose very names we have now forgotten. The flower garden was in front and of much greater extent, and here Miss Christine Ruddfield spent a great deal of her time. A high wall screened it to some extent from impertinent lookers-on, but a very fair glimpse of its glories might be obtained through the great iron gate which opened on a gravel footpath that led straight up to the house. In summer the beds on the lawn were gorgeous with yellow and scarlet. Miss Christine Ruddfield found great fault with the new system of bedding out, but complied with it nevertheless to some extent. But there were wide borders under the walls and round the shrub-

beries in the distance, and here she liked to have the old-fashioned favourites that come up year after year with little cost or trouble. And she delighted in hollyhocks, tall and stately and almost as many-petalled as a rose, and rich deep-dyed dahlias, and clusters of white and yellow lilies; over her bee-hives too she had some gigantic sun-flowers—it was for the good of the little workers she said, but her own tastes, I expect, had something to do with the matter.

The house had been left fully furnished to Christine Ruddfield, and with a plentiful stock of fine linen and old-fashioned plate. The furniture though old was in good preservation; still it had been expected that when the Miss Ruddfields took possession of North End House, they would at least refurnish the principal apartments. Miss Christine did nothing of the kind. The thin-leaved, spider-legged tables with their inlaid borders still remained in the drawing-room, along with the old Indian cabinets and china jars, the faded curtains



and yet more faded carpets. Christine Ruddfield said she liked the old things—Miss Ruddfield mildly acquiesced; and so the old four-post bedsteads remained in all the bedrooms but their own, where something less hearselike was substituted, and the mahogany tables now black with age still stood in the dining-room, though guests never gathered round them to partake of such good cheer as they had so often been burthened with in the time of their former master.

Christine Ruddfield refurnished one apartment, and that was her own sitting-room. It was at the side of the house, and a bay window almost as large as the room itself looked out on part of the flower garden, which here was, if possible, kept in brighter and trimmer order than elsewhere. Beyond the flower garden, here as in the front, some fields lay, Miss Christine's property, which had been bequeathed to her with the house, and on this side they sloped down towards the river, which flowed at the back of the

town, and played an important part in its industries. These fields were only parted from the flower garden by an invisible fence, and in Mrs. Timmins' time they had served as a grazing ground for her cows and her carriage horses. She had been, after an inert, drowsy fashion of her own—being stout, and not disposed to much exertion—a sort of Lady Bountiful to the town, and her cows were kept much more for other people than herself; while it was difficult to see what her horses had been kept for at all, seeing that they scarcely ever went out, and that, when they did, their mistress's chief anxiety had been to get home again, lest the cherished animals should suffer from over-exertion.

Mrs. Timmins had always kept a very plentiful household: a goodly staff of servants, who worked very little harder than her horses: an excellent table, for she appreciated good living, and after a mild indolent fashion was given to hospitality. The people of Stretton held her memory in

honour. She had had a good income, and had spent it amongst them. She had not scrutinised her tradesmen's charges too closely—the mental exertion it would have required to do so would have been too much for her; and she had been liberal with Christmas boxes and benefactions;—altogether, a lady who deserved to be popular in a country town. And though the townspeople were very proud of Miss Christine Ruddfield she was certainly not so popular, as in some things she fell very far short of the laudable example set her by her predecessor.

She had sold off the carriage horses, and let the fields to the principal butcher of the town, not choosing even to keep a pony-chaise. She had parted with the cows, openly saying, that for her small family it would be very much cheaper to buy the milk and butter she required; and she kept only two maids, and hired an occasional gardener, instead of retaining the numerous domestics Mrs. Timmins had maintained. And as the



good people of Stretton knew the incomes the two sisters had inherited from their father, and were aware that Miss Christine had been handsomely remembered by her great-aunt, to say nothing of the fabulous sums which they believed her novels had brought her, it is not to be wondered at that, with all their admiration of her, they considered her in some respects to fall very far short of the lady who had lived in North End House before her.

No one ever thought much of Miss Ruddfield in this or any other matter. She remained in the background, seldom letting even the mere fact of her existence become very apparent to any but the dwellers in the old house. She was not exactly an invalid, though now and then the carriage of Dr. Audrey, the chief doctor of the town, stopped before the door, and the doctor, emerging therefrom, felt Miss Alethea's pulse, prescribed some tonics, and then went his way. She had been a beauty once, far

lovelier than Christine, and it had been confidently expected that she would form such an alliance as would materially improve the position of her family; and instead, she was still unmarried, and living a life which for its stillness and seclusion might have rivalled a nun's. It was Miss Christine who received visitors {and paid calls, who occasionally accepted an invitation to dinner, or an evening party, who directed the household, and paid the tradesmen's bills. Even the servants saw but little of Miss Ruddfield, although it was easy for them to see that on every point Miss Christine studied her sister's wishes far more than her own, for if in any one matter they fell short of their duty as regarded Miss Alethea, Miss Christine resented it with a severity no shortcomings towards herself could have called forth.

- It was about six weeks after Jerry's first introduction to Linden Cottage, when Christine and Alethea Ruddfield sat at breakfast in the

dining-room of North End House. Over the mantelpiece hung a portrait of Mrs. Timmins with a waist three inches deep, a turban, and a bird of Paradise plume. Opposite was her husband, in his official costume as Mayor of Stretton, which dignity he had held every alternate year for the last twenty of his life—Stretton having very few inhabitants fit to hold that high office worthily. The furniture was even older than the portraits. The panelled walls were painted a dull leaden colour, which the crimson moreen curtains were too faded to enliven. Christine Ruddfield, with her matured glowing beauty, was altogether out of keeping with this room. The wonder was, to every one who entered it, that she had not done away with every article of furniture in it—portraits and all. She was very like her own which her brother had taken of her ; still he had caught her at her brightest mood ; and there were times, when Christine's face was at rest, when a story might be read in it altogether different to that

which the picture told—the story of a sorrow not yet outlived, nay, of some humiliation not yet forgotten, it might be of some wrong so bitter it could never be forgiven. You might at times read all this in the fair bright face that now lit up the faded room ; but if you had eyes to read rightly, you would also read that the sorrow and the shame and the wrong, however undeserved they might be, formed the closest secret of Christine Ruddfield's life. Alethea Ruddfield's face was so thoroughly in keeping with the faded room in which the two sat, as to be the greatest contrast possible to her sister's. She was only two years her senior, and looked ten—nay, more ; as if long ago she had found the burthen of life so heavy that simply to endure it from day to day was enough—all enjoyment being out of the question. Her fair hair was streaked with grey, the forehead lined and furrowed, and the thin weak irresolute mouth had a nervous anxious expression, while the blue eyes, from which all brightness had long since fled, had a

habit of turning to her sister's in every emergency ; if it was only the choice of a ribbon or a new dress (and no greater emergency ever troubled Alethea Ruddfield) she could do nothing without Christine. Perhaps the sorrow of which you could yet see the traces in the latter's face had passed over the weaker nature also, crushing and humbling it till weakness had become utter prostration, and simpleness sheer vacuity. Dr. Audrey had once given it as his opinion, in strict confidence, that from many households Miss Ruddfield would have been despatched to a lunatic asylum, and that Miss'Christine possessed not only her own share of brains but her sister's.

There was a decided difference in the dress of the two sisters. Christine wore a dust-coloured alpaca, made becomingly, and brightened up with blue ribbon at the throat, and a collar of immaculate whiteness, but still a cheap dress, and evidently made for use. Her collar and sleeves too were of plain linen. Miss Ruddfield wore a soft Indian silk,

and her collar and the pretty little cap she wore were of real lace. Her very slippers were of a daintier and more expensive make than her sister's. And every now and then she passed her hand fondly over the silk, as if its softness gave her pleasure. It was very clear that whatever economy Christine Ruddfield might think fit to practise in the household, she did not suffer it to affect her sister personally.

There were some letters on the breakfast-table, and a newspaper, brought by the morning's post. They were all directed to Christine. It was the rarest thing possible for Alethea to have a letter. The outer world seemed to have forgotten her completely. Christine opened one, read it, and laughed lightly.

"Shan't let them have it! They want this book for the same as the last, and you know, Alley, it's at least twice as good: besides, I've made my name; that alone is worth half the money I asked. And we're in no hurry, are we, dear? You've all your

pretty dresses for the summer; we can wait, and we *will* wait, but we'll have a fair price for our work."

Alethea smiled and looked almost happy and intelligent as she brightened up under her sister's loving glance.

"And yours is such good work, Christine; you are always so clever. They ought to pay you well."

"So they shall, dear, or not have the book at all. Let me pull down that blind; the sun hurts your eyes. Now shall I butter you some toast? You're making no breakfast. We must run down to the sea-side for a month, and we'll have a pony-chaise every day, and I shall bring you back quite well and strong for the winter. You see, I've been saving so long that I'm quite in funds. I can do it all, and yet afford to wait till I get a fair price for my book." She took up another letter: "From Edgar, I know; he always writes so like a woman—only a great deal better than many a woman,—I for one.

He's at Arkleigh, and has that poor little Claude with him. I wish he'd let us have that child; I'd try and teach her how to play. I wonder how she will get on with all John's rough boys. And oh! good gracious, Alley, if Edgar hasn't one of his own!"

"A baby!" said Alethea, in mild amazement.

"No, full grown—at least full grown for a boy; he picked him up in the streets; he saved Claude from being run over. Poor dear little Claude! just think of it. Then he fell ill, and that wasp of a woman, Gibbs, nursed him, and cared for him, and now he has brought him down and got him into the Grey Coat school. Really, I didn't think Edgar had so much energy in him. He is coming on to us in a week, as he promised to do three months ago. We can't compliment our brother, can we, upon being a very punctual correspondent. We haven't heard from him since then, if you remember."

Miss Alethea played with her spoon and



made no answer. Nothing seemed able to fix her attention for above a second, or to dispel the dull vacant weariness of her face. Christine looked ruefully at her. Sometimes the pitiful sad onesidedness of their intercourse weighed on her heavily. And she was one who would feel her burthens, however bravely she might bear them. She took up another letter and this time read it in silence, although as she read she bit her lips sharply with her small even teeth to keep down the passionate words that were almost forcing themselves upon her utterance. It was a business letter from her bankers, and it ran:—

*Monday, 4th July.*

DEAR MADAM,

WE beg to call your attention to the fact that your account with us is overdrawn, we having last Wednesday honoured your cheque for £20 although that for £150 dated the 26th instant left a balance of only £4 9s. 6d. in our hands. We did not write you at once

to this effect, thinking that you might probably merely have anticipated by a day or two a payment expected to be made to your credit, and we only mention the matter as, owing to your never before having overdrawn your account, we infer that you may not be aware of having done so. Should we be mistaken we shall of course be happy to accommodate you further if you desire it,

And remain, dear MADAM,

Yours obediently,

POCOCK & STREEM.

She gave a sigh that was almost a groan when she had finished, and buried the letter in her pocket. Miss Alethea looked up this time with a little wonder. "Nothing, dear, nothing—only some of our money matters are not going as well as we could wish them, but you don't like to be troubled with such things, I know. We may have to economize a little, but you shall go to the sea-side just the same. I must leave you now. I have

some letters to write. Here are your sunshade and your bonnet. Won't you go into the garden? It's looking its best this morning."

Then she led her to the front door and opened it for her, and Miss Alethea took a languid turn or two upon the lawn, and then sat down not very far from the bees, watching them at their work with as much of interest and pleasure as she ever showed in anything, and her sister sought her own little room at the side of the house.

## CHAPTER VII.

### CHRISTINE'S CARES.

CHRISTINE RUDDFIELD'S morning room was a fresh, bright little bower enough. She had not spent much on its renovation ; the chair coverings and curtains were only of chintz—rosebuds dropped on a ground of moss ; and the ornaments, though pretty enough, were as inexpensive as they well could be. But there were plenty of books about, a needlework cushion or two on the couches, some water-colour sketches of her own on the walls, a flower-stand in the window, and flowers on every one of the tables. These were almost a necessary of life to Christine Ruddfield. They were the last things in which she would

have liked to economize, but, happily for her, cheap flowers are often as lovely as the dearest, and in this matter she was sufficiently republican in her tastes. Her writing-table was the most expensive article of furniture in the room : she had indulged a little in her taste for the luxurious while purchasing it. For Christine liked pretty things, and unhappily a great many pretty things are very costly ones. It was not out of a love of display, but a simple liking for beauty and fitness in all her belongings. Good lace, India shawls, rich silks, and good and well-chosen ornaments : she liked all these, just as she would have liked to see new and handsome furniture about her, instead of the ugly spider-legged chairs and tables, bought at a time when the art of furnishing, like the art of dress, seemed in England at least to have reached its very lowest ; but some imperative necessity—it certainly was not choice, for Christine's nature was royally lavish—seemed to compel her to practise an economy

that, considering her supposed income and her sister's, seemed almost unworthy of her.

Everybody in Stretton who knew of this sanctum of Christine Ruddfield's was a little in awe of it. It was the enchantress's den, where she practised the black art. They had a dim fear that here she sat and photographed their portraits for the benefit of an admiring world. They were a little elated by being photographed, and yet unpleasantly apprehensive that the portraits would not be too flattering. And Christine—who was not half so ready to paint them as they imagined, having seen a good deal of the world before she came to Stretton, including two or three capital cities, a great many of the most celebrated watering-places, and a good deal of the loveliest scenery in Europe, so that altogether she had a larger stock of originals to draw from than the good people of Stretton could furnish her with—was yet malicious enough to enjoy her neighbours' misgivings, that in the next novel she

brought out they would be sure to figure more or less prominently. Like the witches of old, she had no objection to be credited with a little more power than she really possessed, or was at all disposed to exercise.

But she was in no mood this morning to occupy herself after the fashion in which she was believed to employ herself in this her favourite retreat. She closed the door and locked it; then, flinging herself on a low chair by the window, drew out the letter which she had received that morning from the bankers. She read it again, then doubled it up passionately in her hands. "The villain! the mean, thorough-paced villain! Won't he leave us a crust or a roof? Will nothing content him but one's last farthing? And he knows I must keep still, as I did before. If I don't keep a banking account he'll grow more desperate—he could forge my name to a bill as easily as to a cheque, and I should still be obliged to bear the loss in silence. It's not eight months ago

since the last robbery in the same manner, and now this fresh villany. I suppose nothing but our utter beggary will stop him—and sometimes it seems hardly worth while fighting to stave that off a little longer.”

Something of the forlorn weariness that was her sister's habitual expression stole for a moment over Christine Ruddfield's face—only for a moment; then she brightened up again with something of her usual energy and decision. “I will close my account at the bank. I must give them some reason for doing so. I can't overdraw it then;” and she smiled bitterly. “If my name is put to a bill I think it is not likely to be taken up without some inquiry, and while such inquiry is being made, there may be time for the forger to take flight; let him look to himself if he does not! I seem to have borne till I can bear no more,—till even the possible shame from which once I so shrunk seems to have lost its terrors. Let it come if it must! I have been dreading



it for so long, that now it seems as though, if it did come at last, the reality of its presence could scarcely be worse than the fear of it has been all these years."

She folded up the letter and went to a little Indian cabinet in a recess of the room—one of the few choice and pretty things amongst so many ugly ones which she had inherited with North End House and its plenishing. She unlocked a drawer, and put this letter carefully away in it. There were several other papers there, and she said as she laid this one on them, "Just another wretched chapter of this base story."

She closed the drawer and opened another. There were several miscellaneous articles there—relics, most of them, of people long passed away: a miniature of her mother: the seal her father had always worn pendant from his watch-chain with a great R engraved upon it. How often she had played with it as a child! A faded blue ribbon which Launcelot Chastelar had given her for her

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hair when she was a girl of fourteen, whispering as he did so a part of the old song about

“A bunch of blue ribbon  
To tie up my bonny brown hair.”

She had kept the ribbon along with one or two of his letters; the others and all his presents had been returned when she had broken off their engagement, and there letters and ribbon lay—all that was now left to her of Launcelot Chastelar. Then she took out a little woollen shoe,—pink and white, faded and rather dirty, with a small hole just where some tiny toe had pushed its way out into the world;—just the shoe that one sometimes sees on the pavement as it has dropped from some baby foot—just the shoe that sometimes mothers hoard amongst their dearest relics, and weep over, thinking of little feet whose dimpled beauty they will never kiss again. And she held it lovingly and tenderly for a moment; then, pressing it to her lips, put it softly back and closed the drawer.

Then she sat down again by the window with an altered look upon her face. It was still sad and weary, but some of its bitterness had passed away; after a time she drew out the first letter she had read that morning and looked at it again. "They must have their way," she said; "Alethea must have change of air, and there are expenses I can meet in no other way. I can't afford to wait, and I must write again, sheerly for money this time—and I suppose then it will be worth just the money and nothing more. Well, let my next book be what it may, Alethea at any rate shall want for nothing."

Then she locked the Indian cabinet and went out about her household affairs, trying to put away from her as far as might be all memory of the skeleton her little sanctum enclosed. A sadder and a ghastlier one than any of her neighbours thought of who looked upon the room with such unspoken awe.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### IN DREAM CORNER.

THE cheeriest, homeliest, least pretentious, most picturesque, roomy, comfortable, and every way adaptable building in or about Arkleigh, was Riverside. John Harrison Ruddfield's great-grandfather, the founder of the family, had built it, and since then it had gone down in unbroken succession to each eldest son. John had long intended to build himself a better and more imposing house. He would have liked to take his place amongst the county magnates, but he was a prudent man, and shrank from launching too soon into the outlay necessary for such a purpose; and he had a little more sentiment than he was aware of in

him ; he liked the house, the old associations connected with it, his mother's parlour and her pretty quaint flower garden, the dining-room where his father, who had been three years Mayor, had so often dispensed his hospitalities in a style that had endeared him to the hearts—or it might be some lower organs—of his fellow-townsmen. He liked to see the river on which he had rowed so often when a younger man, and where he had nearly lost his life once on a bitter winter's night through his boat sticking amongst the reeds. He liked the orchard with its gnarled moss-grown trees, and the fields stretching out at the back, where in summer his cattle browsed knee-deep in golden buttercups, or his children tossed and tumbled in the hay as he had done years before. He liked too the nearness to the Brewery ; he had a good manager, and a first-rate brewer, still he did not disdain to look after matters himself, and was convinced that they throve all the better because

he spent his money within a few furlongs of the place where he made it. His house too was near the town—two or three fields, a lane or two of small houses, the great foundry which was afterwards distinguished by one of its members representing the town, the little black smoke-grimed dwellings of the workmen, and you were in Arkleigh; and yet, except for the ever-changing life of the river, where laden barges came heavily floating in with their merchandise, or steamers went snorting out towards the great sea, with their burthen of health or pleasure seekers, or the gay little boats made its dark surface bright with the shirt-sleeves of the rowers and the finery of their sweethearts, and the necessary stir caused by the near proximity to the Brewery, you were as still as if miles away from a populous town. John Harrison Ruddfield was a business man, and an ambitious one, valuing social distinction to the full as much as any woman; but underneath the

business and the ambition there was a little romance and a great deal of common sense, and both romance and common sense combined to keep him at Riverside much longer than he had intended when he first married.

Mrs. Ruddfield had no wish to move. She trembled, figuratively, at the bare idea. Literally, she appeared incapable of showing any kind of emotion whatever. A large, pale woman, stout—and, if we may dare say so, stupid, with a thoroughly invincible stupidity, of which she herself had some faint consciousness, though that consciousness never ruffled her serenity for a moment. She was wise enough, to all appearance, for all the duties which Providence required of her. She brought a baby into the world every twelvemonth, and, having done so, consigned it to the charge of her head nurse, and felt that in paying that personage as handsomely as she did, she had fulfilled all the duties that maternity required of her. The boys went to a boarding-school at some little distance,

and the girls had a daily governess. When the boys were at home they had their own way pretty well with their mother, and, whenever their father was absent, ran about the Brewery, rode the big dray-horses to water, talked school-boy slang to the men as something more refined than their broad Eastshire dialect, learned the best points of a terrier, and every now and then, when thoroughly secure of their father's absence for the day, got up a rat-hunt in capital style in one or other of the Brewery granaries.

Mrs. Ruddfield was not at all an ambitious woman. The position she held thoroughly satisfied her. She had a vague fear that if she occupied another, she would not fill it worthily without taking a great deal more trouble than she felt at all disposed to do. Her husband had been Mayor once, and Mrs. Ruddfield still spoke of that time, and the exertions she had been called upon to make, with a mild horror. Her persuasions had induced him to decline the honour



when it had been offered him a second time. She had great faith in her sister-in-law Christine—great faith, and not one scrap of jealousy. She accepted Christine's superior talents and capability with a calm self-satisfaction that such valuable qualities were in the family. She liked her almost as well as her torpid nature would allow her to like anything, having an idea that Christine's exceptional cleverness amply atoned for any shortcomings of her own. There was so much intellectual status in the family—if one had a little less, another had a little more; and so the sum total was really a satisfactory one.

So, on the whole, Mrs. Ruddfield was very well pleased when, about a week after Edgar Ruddfield's arrival at River, her two sisters-in-law paid her a visit. They gave her very little for Alethea, but she was always welcome. It was a fine bright day, and a fine bright pony-chaise

occasion drove up the carriage road towards the house, and stopped before the quaint old porch. Mrs. Ruddfield had seen her cook, paid her morning visit to her nursery, kissed her baby, and patted the two who ranked next to the baby on the cheeks, and so, having performed her domestic and maternal duties for the day, had seated herself in her drawing-room with her worsted work before her.

She always did worsted work, and she never did anything else. She had her canvas tightly drawn in a frame, and she put her needle in and out with a solemnity that was wonderful to see. She liked set patterns, stripes and spots, and when her work was done it really looked almost as well as a piece of carpet. She was now engaged on a pair of slippers for her husband; there was very little counting required, so that if she had been in her mind at all it would have been left to her to do as she pleased. Her brother-in-law was pacing up and

down the drawing-room, now and then looking out of the window, and then trying to extract what amusement he could from the furniture books upon the table. John had gone to the Brewery, and would not return till the two o'clock dinner; Edgar had no letters to write, it was too soon for the newspaper, and too hot for a walk, and after a while he looked at Mrs. Ruddfield's flat large white face and wondered how he should get through the next three hours. She held up her work to him to be admired.

"Slippers for John. He knows nothing about them. A little surprise for him next Christmas. I give him a pair every Christmas. Last year he had brown spots on a blue ground, this year you see it is blue spots on a brown ground. Makes a pretty change, doesn't it?"

Edgar Ruddfield assented, then again he looked at the annuals on the table—perennials they might have been called, seeing they had all been purchased along with other

decorative articles at the time of Mr. Ruddfield's marriage, and had not been renewed since—and then, looking at his sister-in-law, he thought somehow of a great white-heart cabbage which he had seen that morning in the kitchen garden, and wondered if its passive existence could be called life. If it could, why then Mrs. Ruddfield might be said to live also; and then the sound of wheels drew him to the window, and looking out he saw Christine, and felt duly thankful.

In she came. No question but that she lived her life, whatever the white-heart cabbage or Mrs. Ruddfield might do. She was smiling, bright, and, to all appearance, happy. Very keen eyes might perhaps have detected a shadow under all the apparent brilliancy, but neither Edgar Ruddfield's eyes nor Mrs. Ruddfield's were particularly keen.

"You look so well," said the latter, "and Alethea, poor dear, looks just as ill as she always does. Now I wonder what can be the reason of such a difference between you two."

"We won't try to find out just now, Harriet," said Christine. "We'll give Alethea a glass of wine first—she's tired with her drive—and sit her down where she can see the river. I think this window is the most charming I ever looked out of. We've come to spend a long day with you, and take Edgar back with us if he'll come. He's over due at Stretton already. We've been expecting him the last three days, and at last have come to fetch him."

"I've been coming the last three days," said Edgar Ruddfield, "but every evening John has promised to accompany me on the morrow, and every morning has brought something that imperatively required his presence in Arkleigh."

Then three boys, aged respectively thirteen, twelve, and eleven, large and robust for their age, came rushing in to welcome Aunt Christine. She was very popular with all children, but most especially with boys. They were home for their holidays, so the governess had

given her pupils one, as lessons would have been altogether out of the question with their brothers at home. Two little girls made their appearance presently; they had been in the garden with the boys, and had stopped behind them to adjust their toilets. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield looked about for Claude, then he asked of her cousins if they knew what had become of her. No one did. Emily volunteered the information (for which Reginald *sotto voce* called her a sneak) that she had been with them an hour ago, when the boys had been rude to her, and she had withdrawn herself, telling them that till they behaved like gentlemen she would have nothing to do with them. Madeline suggested that she might have gone to the garret, and Christine volunteered to go and look for her there.

There was a whole suite of rooms neither inhabited nor fit for habitation, at the top of the house. The pointed roofs were formed of the rafters alone, and the latticed

windows had several of their panes broken. The floor was rough and dark with age, there were two or three mysterious trap-doors, which however opened only upon cupboards in the thick old walls, and here the worn-out furniture and the miscellaneous lumber which accumulates during the successive generations of a family were stowed away. A flight of stairs built in the thickness of the wall led up to the roof. There was a door before them which Mr. Ruddfield considered ought to be kept locked for fear of the children breaking their necks through imitating the cats. His wife agreed with him, sent for the locksmith to fit a key to the lock, and then kept the key where every one of the children old enough to make use of it could find it.

Claude was not in any of the attics. Her aunt called her, but in vain. Presently she heard the faint mew of a kitten, and upon searching found two soft warm little balls of fur curled up in a basket of hay, with, to keep them snugger and warmer still, a little red

merino petticoat with "Claude Ruddfield" written in marking ink upon the band. She took up one of the kittens—she had all the fondness to which as a single lady she was entitled, for such animals—and stroked it softly. Kitty mewed the louder, and a plaintive noise, evidently that of Kitty's mamma, answered from the roof above. Christine now guessed pretty shrewdly where she should find her niece, and opening the door at the foot of the stairs which led to the roof quietly went up them—so quietly that she came quite unperceived upon Claude.

The child had scrambled on the red tiled roof to a little nook between two of the gables, and now sat with a tabby cat in her lap, and a volume of Shakespeare half closed in her hand. She could see the river from where she sat, and the fields on the other side, while just below lay the flower garden of Riverside. Her little feet were tucked under her dress; she had tied a white handkerchief over her head, and if only the cat



would have been quiet instead of persistently responding to her kitten's appeals, Claude would have presented a very fair picture of content. Presently she saw her aunt's face above the level of the roof, and gave a little start, but soon recovered her composure.

"You may go away now, Puss, my aunt has come ;" and she released the poor animal. "I am so glad to see you, Aunt Christine. Please come and sit down by me ; there's quite room enough for two. I came up here for a little peace and quiet—and I brought Puss to keep me company. I didn't like to be quite alone, you know, and that cat is really a sensible creature, and she was so fond of me, after I saved her from the boys, till her kittens came—and she hasn't seemed to care so much for me since then," added Claude plaintively.

"What were the boys doing to her ?" asked Aunt Christine, seating herself by the side of her niece as comfortably as circumstances permitted.

"Shoeing her with walnut-shells full of hot wax," said Claude solemnly. "They were in the kitchen, and Emily came and told me of it." The child's eyes dilated with horror as she spoke. "I came down and caught her from them, and ran up with her towards Aunt Ruddfield's bedroom ; she was dressing for a party, and, when she heard me screaming, came to the door and opened it. I pushed the cat into her arms, for all the boys were after me, and I really did not know what else to do ; and she was so angry because the poor creature scratched her neck a little (she had a low dress on, you know) and tore her lace ; I didn't think Aunt Harriet could be angry before, but she was then : but still, what were a few scratches compared to the cat's being lamed for life ? After that I brought Puss into the attics and made her a nice little bed where I don't think the boys will find her, and every day cook gives me a few scraps and a little milk for her. She's a nice person, cook, and I like her ; I read to her of an evening,

just as I used to do to Gibbs. We're going through Shakespeare now; she hadn't heard of him before, only that he had written something about a negro—'nigger' she calls him; so I told her she meant Othello, and explained that he wasn't a negro but a Moor,—but I couldn't get her to understand the difference; she said it was all the same, one black man was as good as another."

"Do you often come up here, Claude?" asked her aunt.

"Whenever I can get Reginald to let me have the key—and it is such a comfort!" said Claude with a sigh. "The boys are so noisy, and Emily and Madeline think of nothing but their dolls—one really doesn't know what to find to talk to them about."

"I wish, Claude, you thought of dolls a little too," said her aunt wistfully; "I wish—oh! I do wish that your father would let me have you to teach you a few things that every child of your age ought to know how to do."

"I think I know as much as most girls of my age," said Claude, with a little emphasis on the word 'girls'—she did not at all like being called a child. "I should like you to see my French exercises; and I'm nearly through Mangnall's Questions; and I don't like needlework, but I do it—only I don't see any use in spending my time upon dolls' things."

"Oh, my dear Claude, I've no doubt you are the cleverest pupil that your governess ever had—I don't want to teach you any more of those matters, but if you were to come to me I should like you to learn how to roll in the hay, and to smother me with it, and to climb over stiles, and to run in the fields and gather buttercups now, and blackberries by and by—and to toss a ball and play battledore and shuttlecock, and to forget Mangnall's Questions for a little while, and take to fairy tales instead."

"I like fairy tales," said Claude gravely.

I've read the 'Arabian Nights' twice through, and I think I prefer them to Shakespeare. You see, I am not quite clear that I always understand him."

"That's a comfort," said Aunt Christine gravely; "I've some hopes of you, Claude, after all. I'll see if I can't find some more fairy tales for you when I go home. Now, tell me about the little boy who saved you from being run over."

"He's a very odd child," said Claude, looking earnestly at her aunt.

"You ought to be a good judge on such a point, my dear. Well, in what does his oddness consist?"

"He uses such peculiar words. Gibbs says they're very often bad ones, and that Papa ought not to let me be so much with him, but Papa said he couldn't do me any harm, and I might do him some good—and it was quite impossible, you know, for Gibbs to attend to him and do her other work while he was ill, so of course I

had to see to him a little. He has never been to school, and he hasn't nice friends by what he tells me of them, though he always says they're just as good as other people. He never had either a father or a mother, and never heard of the Bible or Jesus till I read to him out of my little Testament. He liked that, but he shocked Gibbs so by the way he talked about them——"

"What did he say?" asked Aunt Christine, seeing Claude hesitate.

"He said Jesus was an out-and-outer," said Claude below her breath, "and he should have liked to have bunged up Judas's eye with a stone for peaching on him. Those were just his words, and you've no idea how angry Gibbs was with him for saying such things."

"I should like to know your young friend," said Aunt Christine; "I must get you to introduce him to me. Well, what has your papa done with him since he brought him here?"

"He lives with one of uncle's dray-

men for the present, but he told me he didn't like the woman; she'd a worse jaw than Gibbs. And he's going to the Grey Coat School. He was to have his new clothes on to-day, and come and show himself in them. I hope the boys won't be at home when he does come. They might make some very unpleasant remarks, and hurt Jerry's feelings."

"I think we had better go down now, and see if he has come; and I am going to lock the door at the foot of the stairs, and try if the key can't be kept where Reginald won't find it. My little Claude is not quite so surefooted as a cat, and we don't want to find her all broken to pieces one day at the foot of Riverside. Still, as you may want a quiet place when the boys are too troublesome, if you come here next summer, I'll show you the snuggest little nook in the world—though I hope you won't come to it too often—where I've sat many a day when I was your age and

long after, and which I used to call my dream corner."

"Did you dream about your books there, Aunt?" asked Claude eagerly, as she rose and followed her aunt across the roof and down the steep, narrow stairs which led from it. When they were at the bottom, Aunt Christine locked the door and put the key in her pocket, intending to give it to her brother John and ask him to keep it where his sons would not find it quite so readily as they had hitherto done. Then she led the way across the attics towards a recess nearly hidden by an accumulation of lumber, and pushing some of this aside led Claude behind and showed her a small window three feet from the floor, with a ledge quite broad enough to hold the child; then found an old stool which served as a stepping-stone, and a faded cushion which she laid on the seat, and then assisted Claude to ascend.

"You are safe there, high as the window



is. My father had these bars put when he found how fond I was of this place. Now you can see over town and river and country, a better view than ever had the Lady of Shalott—at least I used to think so.”

“Did you really sit here, Aunt?” said Claude delightedly. “And was it here you dreamt about your books?” she repeated.

“Yes—and many things besides,” said Aunt Christine sadly. She passed her arm round the child and looked out on the same view which had so often met her eyes when a girl. It was all so nearly the same. The river, as ever, full of changing life. The many gables of the old red-tiled houses were just the same. Perhaps in the distance towards the railway station there were a few more modern villas than there had been, another factory or two might send forth their smoke, and a line or two more of small red brick habitations for their work-people have sprung up, but there was little difference besides. It was just the same

picture of thrift and stir and homely industry, with the picturesque adjuncts of the far-spreading fields beyond and the quaint old time-worn buildings in the centre, that it had been when she was a girl, and had sat there and dreamed her dreams.

"Did you sit here, and think how you would make yourself famous when you grew up, Aunt, and have people write about you and put your name in the papers?" asked Claude, and then kept silence, for a strange sad change had passed over her aunt's face.

"Sometimes," she answered softly, "but not so often as I did of other things."

Yes, she had sat there, and dreamed of Laüncelot Chastelar. How in the years to come she was to be his wife,—the possible mother of his children. Christine had had the element of maternity strong in her, and in all her bygone dreams of her wedded home, bright little children, hereafter to grow up into brave men and fair women, mingled largely. She had felt the power, which had

since taken form and shape, stirring within her, and though she knew it not, it was that which had made the young lawyer seem more loveable,—more lovable in her eyes than a prosaic fancy might have pictured him. She had thought there how good a wife she would be to him, how bright a home she would keep for him, and she had resolved with all her heart that whatever gifts she had should be cultivated to the utmost to make her more worthy of him. That was all. She hoped to reach his level, nothing more. She had not had a thought then—possibly if she had been his wife never would have had—that hers was the stronger, richer, higher nature of the two. She had loved Launcelot Chastelar with all her heart, and with a reverence and humbleness of which he had not thought her capable. He, who had looked upon her portrait, and wondered if after all she would have been altogether a safe and desirable wife for him!

He had understood her just as little as most men understand most women. It is very

likely that if Christine had been his wife, no world but their own little local one would ever have heard her name. She would have thrown herself with all her heart and soul into her daily cares and joys, and that genius whose inconvenient manifestations he had rather dreaded would just have served to lighten his home and amuse his leisure hours, as certainly neither were amused or lightened now. Well, things had not gone according to her dreams. For her husband she had her sister, helpless and childish; for the busy wedded life she might have had, with its small ambitions, its little social aspirations, and its household duties, she had chosen a career for herself which, amongst those at least who had known her from her childhood, made her almost exceptional amongst women; and for the girls and boys she might have had, the belles to bring out at the county balls; the sons to send forth into the world, to pray and to hope for as each toiled onward, she had—a faded little shoe in the old cabinet at home.

## CHAPTER IX.

### JERRY'S APPEARANCE AT RIVERSIDE.

"LET us go down, Claude," said Aunt Christine. "We have been long enough in my dream corner. Come, child, and let us see how the world downstairs is going on."

Not very well, apparently, to judge by the noise that proceeded from the large flagged hall, from which ascended a tumult of boyish voices, in the midst of which Claude detected Jerry's accents. She peered over the broad oaken baluster:—"Oh, Aunt, he's there, and they're all teasing him. I must go down and tell them how very ungentlemanly I think their behaviour."

She flew down. Christine was hesitating whether she should follow when Mrs. Rudd-

field came out of the drawing-room. The hubbub struck her ear, and she turned to her sister-in-law: "It's a singular thing, isn't it, that one always knows when the boys are at home. That must be them, and really I think they are making more noise than ever. Do go down, Christine—boys always mind you—and ask them if they couldn't be a little quieter."

"It's time that somebody went to them," said Christine, looking, as Claude had done, over the balusters. "There are two of the Grammar School boys amongst them, and between them all, our little friend Jerry—I suppose that's Jerry—seems to have enough to do."

So Jerry had. He had come in not feeling very comfortable in his new clothes as one of the Grey Coat School. He didn't like the clothes, and to say the truth they were at least peculiar. The coat was grey—hence the name of the school—and it was cut with long flaps which reached nearly to Jerry's ankles. It buttoned closely to the waist, where it met a pair of buff breeches which fitted much too

tightly for Jerry's notions of comfort, and below these were a pair of worsted stockings of the same colour. The stockings chafed Jerry terribly. He felt ready, as he expressed it, to tear himself to pieces, and he would have worn his old rags, which at least allowed him some sense of freedom, with infinitely more satisfaction than he did the school livery. His attire was completed by a hat of the veritable chimney-pot shape, which made Jerry's head ache with its weight, and in his hand he carried a "posy," as Mrs. Simpkins, the good woman with whom Edgar Ruddfield had located him, expressed it. She had gathered this out of her own garden; it was a bright little cluster of marigolds and sweet-williams, and plenty of southernwood and bergamot mint to give it fragrance; and she had scrubbed Jerry's face till the soap had got in his eyes and up his nose and down his ears, and he had declared she meant to wear his skin out. Gibbs had been bad enough, and the new clothes which she had had manufactured for

him out of an old suit of her master's had been inflictions terrible to bear, but what were they to these? Jerry felt at every step as if he should tread on his coat, and throw himself down, or his hat would come tumbling over his eyes, or his lower garments would burst; and as to his stockings, they were working him up into a state of irritability that was almost unendurable.

Still, he meant to be a good boy, and find his way to better things than he had known as yet, and therefore he came obediently enough to Riverside, to show himself in his new clothes as Mrs. Simpkins had bidden him; and, when the door had opened, had come into the hall and stood there shame-faced and shiny, feeling as if all his London *verve* and effrontery were washed out of him, and that the new clothes had made a new boy of him altogether, and so, muttering the formula that Mrs. Simpkins had told him, as the correct thing to be repeated under similar circumstances, stood as still as a little plaster image



waiting to be looked at, and timidly hoping that the "gentry," as Mrs. Simpkins expressed it, would not forget to line his pockets.

The old Adam was quite subdued in Jerry for a little while, but it broke out at once, when Reginald and his brothers, accompanied by two boys from the Grammar School, entered the hall. The latter young gentlemen wore flat collegiate caps on their heads. Jerry had seen such in the town before, and formed sundry speculations as to the reason of such headgear being worn. He eyed them curiously now, but still kept silence. Not so the others. They were not bad boys, but three of them were at home for the holidays, and the other two having just finished their lessons were ready for any lively little interlude that might present itself before recommencing them; and so they now crowded round Jerry, inspected his toilet, smelled his flowers, and ended by asking him if he did not think himself a thorough swell? Unluckily this question, being put by Harry Bedell, the son of a

wealthy farmer who had allowed his boy, before sending him to Arkleigh, to associate with his labourers rather more than was good for him, savoured slightly of the Eastshire dialect. Jerry's quick ear detected it directly. His own patois was the most thorough Cockaigne; not the less his contempt for every other corruption of his mother tongue was infinite. He glanced at his interrogator with superb disdain, and said, "Speak English, an' I'll talk to yer."

The Grammar School boy thought as much of himself as a grammar school boy generally does. The young Ruddfields laughed, which made Harry more furious still, and he asked Jerry, not too suavely, what he meant by his impudence.

"Stow yer cheek now, I want none o' your gab," was the answer, given with unruffled calmness. "I came to show myself to the gentlefolks, if there are any in this house. Is there one of you coves as can tell me where to find 'em?"

"Little beggar! Impudent young varmint! Cheeky little vagabond!" were the appellations that now greeted Jerry, and a shower of cuffs, delivered with right goodwill, fell on his face and shoulders. His hat was knocked over his eyes, his nosegay was knocked out of his hand, but that mattered little—Jerry soon recovered himself, and, blinded as he was, sprang forward and hit out furiously right and left.

It was at this juncture that Claude appeared upon the scene. "For shame, you big boys! five of you down on a little one like this!" and she threw herself into the midst of the *mêlée*, and stood before Jerry as if to defend him.

A chance blow—not one of the boys would have hit her on purpose, not one could afterwards be brought to own that it was his hand which had inflicted it—struck her, and she gave a little cry, but still stood her ground. Aunt Christine was now in the hall. She took Jerry under one arm, Claude under the other, and then said, "Now, boys, if you must fight, here are three of us."

Jerry's assailants were all very much ashamed, and began some sort of a confused explanation, of course throwing all the blame upon the "impertinent little beggar" who had begun it. Jerry himself by this time had got the hat off his eyes, and glared wildly around. "Let me only get at him!—let me only get at him as did it," he said, and then endeavoured to break loose from Aunt Christine that he might make another attack on his foes.

"Keep still," she said. "They won't hurt you any more."

"It isn't *that* I minds," said Jerry, "but which on 'em hit *her*? If I won't dowse his daylights for him I'll be —."

Then Jerry swore. Claude shrieked and stopped her ears, and the boys laughed. "Well, done, little un! It's time you went to school."

"Quite time," said Aunt Christine looking fixedly at them. "And it's to be hoped when he *is* there, that his master will teach him, first to be civil to strangers, and next that fighting

five to one is scarcely fair: though it may be considered so amongst the pupils of a Grammar School," she added, directing a glance at the owners of the college caps which made them feel ready to wish that the floor beneath would open and let them down into the cellars, "or amongst the young gentlemen who are sent by their mammas to a select private academy," she added, glancing at her nephews. "Come along with me, child," she said to Jerry, and led him up the stairs. "If you *do* swear, which is a very shocking thing for any one to do, at any rate you know how to hit fair—I wish I could say the same of every one here."

And so began Jerry's acquaintance with Christine Ruddfield.

## CHAPTER X.

### WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

THE hall door, which the boys on their entry to the house had not stopped to close, swung back on its hinges, and two gentlemen entered, neither of whom had seen Christine Ruddfield for so long a period that the elder of the two might well be excused for passing her, as he did, with a slight inclination of the head as to a perfect stranger. It was an odd situation in which to find a lady, but when "the boys" were at home nothing seemed odd or unusual at Riverside. If he thought at all on the matter it was only to suppose that the girls' governess had left her own domain to pro-

tect one or other of her pupils against the attacks of her brothers, and he passed up the broad oaken staircase with the air of a man sufficiently well pleased to ascend to quieter regions out of the affray, and quite enough at home to do so without waiting to be announced. Christine knew him, if he had forgotten her. The years had made less difference with him than with her. His hair was just a little more grizzled, looking, as it always did, as if slightly powdered, only the powder was rather thicker now. The features were only rather more pointed in their aristocratic outline, and the tall figure, if as thin and spare, was not a whit more bowed than it had been ten years ago. She knew him at once for Mr. Raoul Chastelar, the same gentleman who ten years ago had confidently expected to be her father-in-law. But the other gentleman knew *her*. Was it her portrait which he had so recently seen, or were his eyes keener or his memory quicker than his father's, that he recognized

her at once? He had been looking on her at least a minute before she saw him, looking on her with the children nestling under her protecting arms, with her eyes lit up by the lecture she was giving their late tormentors, with the motherly warmth and courage and tenderness pervading her whole attitude, and thought that so she would have been if the years had gone as he had once hoped they would go—so she would have been with his children nestling to her for protection, his boy and girl folded in the warm motherliness of her embrace, all the light and the glow that lit up her loveliness and made it so doubly fair called up by ties and affections that they shared in common.

Christine turned and saw him. He ought to have had the best of it, having had that one minute all to himself, but instead, it was with her, and she came forward quiet and unembarrassed, holding out the little white hand which he had once kissed with all the passion that was in his nature. That was all over



now. She knew it at any rate. He was mortified, humbled, angry ; had she ever loved him, this woman who now stood there with a society smile and gesture, apologising for the noise the boys had made, and the task Mrs. Ruddfield had given her of quieting them.

"We'll go upstairs out of their way—Claude, you'll come too: Jerry, what shall I do with you? Reginald, I put him under your charge. You're not to let any one ill-use him, nor do so yourself. Take him into the kitchen and give him something to eat. And I suppose we must line his pockets, eh? We always used to do that," she said, with a smile, to Launcelot Chastelar, "when the Grey Coat boys came to show us their new things."

Then she gave Jerry a small piece of money, and Mr. Launcelot Chastelar gave him one a little larger, and then followed Miss Christine Ruddfield upstairs, while Reginald took his charge to the kitchen.

Mr. Chastelar by this time had found that Alethea Ruddfield was an old acquaintance,

and now came forward and claimed her sister as one. In his heart he had neither forgiven nor forgotten the slight the latter lady had put upon his son, but it would have been impossible to have guessed as much from his manner. He was always courtesy itself; a little stiff; a little punctilious in the eyes of younger men—with whom however, be it said *en passant*, good breeding seems rapidly becoming one of the extinct fine arts. With women, however, the stiffness had a latent warmth, a subdued geniality that they all liked. It was suitable and appropriate to one who had the interests of so many women to think of. And it was sincere too, for Mr. Chastelar was a kind-hearted as well as an honourable man—generally sincere, but sometimes sincerity had to strain itself a little, as in the present case. Mr. Chastelar seriously and gravely disapproved of Miss Christine Ruddfield for other reasons than the wrong she had done his son. He liked women, respected them, valued them—in their place; and this

place was one very different to that which women of the present day are claiming. Women were to be protected, taken care of, petted a little, humoured it may be, indulged in all things that were good and lawful for them; but the less they were heard of, unless for their beauty—and the old gentleman would allow a woman, all other things permitting, to be the belle of a county—the better. He had a vague dread of, and a very decided dislike to female authors. It grieved him very much when Christine Ruddfield not only rushed into print, but put her name to her productions. He felt then that it was well she had not married his son. It would then have been *his* name which she would have obtruded before the public, *his* name which would have appeared in the castigations of the *Scarifier*, the praises of the *Piccadilly*. To think of a woman laying herself open to criticism, however favourable; to praise or blame in print, which any one who paid their twopence or threepence might read! It was making a show of herself—a show of her.

own soul—of her inmost thoughts and feelings ; she might almost as soon have got a living by sitting to artists or travelling through the country in a showman's van. It was not that he scouted literature in itself as a vocation—his provincialism hardly extended to that, but it was not a vocation for women—they were too sacred, too set apart, for all the publicity, the rough handling, the fault-finding, or the praise that because of its publicity was in his eyes as bad as any blame. Perhaps it was the very chivalry of his nature that made him take a view that might seem so narrow-minded and illiberal, and place Christine Ruddfield, woman of genius, brilliant, clever, energetic, versatile, on a lower pedestal than that occupied by such as his son's wife or her own sister-in-law Mrs. John Harrison Ruddfield.

But there was no trace of this in his manner to-day. To all appearance Miss Christine Ruddfield might all these years have been pursuing a course of life calculated, in its tame monotonous obscurity, to

call forth his heartiest approval. To Alethea he showed himself so much concerned about the evident change for the worse in her health that she brightened and warmed up as much as it was possible for her to do. His solicitude was so flattering, and to flattery Miss Alethea was still susceptible. You could not be in the room five minutes with her without seeing that you were with one who had been a beauty, and could not forget the fact now. The turn of her head, the persistent manner in which she would let you see her profile—it had always been so much admired—were sufficient for the purpose. Christine knew she was handsome—it was an accepted fact, and there was an end of it. You might or might not remember it just as you pleased; but you were never suffered to forget it with Alethea. She had gone through a great deal—must have done, before she had sunk into this state of chronic invalidism—had in some way or another lost very much; not merely

health, but whatever energy and self-reliance she might once have had—but the fact that she was once an acknowledged beauty remained; she had that, and the profile, which was still almost perfect, to console her for it all.

Mr. Chastelar and his son had called to see Mr. Edgar Ruddfield. They were busy men, especially the younger, but they could spare a little time for friendliness and courtesy, and it was thus they had encountered Christine so inopportunist. It was the first time since she had taken up her residence at Stretton that they had met: looking at her, Launcelot Chastelar hardly knew whether or not to wish that such meetings should be more frequent.

She was just her picture, and just too what he had expected to find her—radiant, lively, voluble,—the very woman, to all appearance, to cast a man off without a sigh or a struggle on her part. She was her own old girlish self intensified in every way. He

might have known that she would grow up into this—she was altogether what he had expected. Only there was something that he had not expected in the tone with which she addressed Claude. How had her voice and her eyes learnt that trick of tenderness that seemed so motherly? Was it born in her, or had the years developed it—could it have been deeper, sweeter, fuller, if indeed those children he had seen with her had been his and hers? How would she look on his child?—love it for his sake—surely she had loved him a little once—or hate it for its mother's? Then there came a feeling across him which it is scarcely desirable a man should feel as regards his wife—a sense that no other woman would hate *her*, simply because she would not be worth the trouble of hating. He could not fancy this superb bright creature feeling anything for Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar but the mildest of contempt. But with Mrs. Launcelot it would be different; she

knew the story of the past, as indeed, who in all Arkleigh, St. Ewald's, and Stretton did not?—and he felt that she had never quite forgiven Christine Ruddfield her priority in his affections. And she would have so much more to forgive now; Christine was so far the handsomer; had, without knowing it herself, such a faculty of making every other woman look small beside her—to say nothing of those objectionable talents which Mrs. Launcelot affected to despise, and tried so hard to think she did, that it would be impossible for her to do anything but hate her with that righteous hatred that only good women feel.

Yes, he knew quite enough of his wife to feel sure that she at least would take the trouble to dislike Christine Ruddfield with all her heart and soul.

Christine sat with Claude on her lap thinking how very little Launcelot Chastelar had changed in all the years. He had always been grave and thoughtful, older than his age, with



that indefinable air and stamp of race which the consciousness of gentle blood, where, as in a family like the Chastelars, the traditions and the dignities of a line are handed down from one generation to another, is apt to give. The Chastelars' blood was as blue in its way as that of any Howard or Percy. Possibly a *mésalliance* would have been looked upon with less abhorrence by a member of either of these ducal houses than by a scion of the Huguenot-descended squirearchy.

At any rate the Chastelars had always an invincible faith in themselves and their race, and such a faith is sure to manifest itself outwardly. Father and son looked what they were—the best men of their place, and though it would have been impossible to have accused either of arrogance or self-sufficiency, still it was patent, that not only were they the best, but perfectly aware of it.

Whatever other thoughts she might have had—uneasy remembrances, or self-reproach—Christine showed nothing. She talked, as it

was so rare a thing for Launcelot Chastelar to hear women talk, of their foreign travel and experiences; of their life in Italy; of art at home and abroad. She never talked *blue*—it is so difficult to portray her cleverness with pen and ink, to bring the light conversational tone before you—to show her flitting from one subject to another—evidently well acquainted with and interested in whatever she touched upon, but never boring you by her depth or astounding you with her cleverness. Only it was very clear that she had lived her life all these years, stretched her wings in more ways than one, and the wonder was to Launcelot Chastelar how, after all, she could have come back to her native county, and let even the temptation of the comfortable red brick house which had been bequeathed her induce her to settle down in its stillest and most stagnant town.

“It may be that she wants rest after it all,” he thought; “she’ll have enough of it there to make her very ready for another flight.”

Meanwhile, right or not, he took "the good the gods provided," and in spite of a dull uneasy sensation at the bottom of his heart, a sensation that would make itself felt whenever Christine Ruddfield was recalled to his memory, enjoyed the sunshine of her presence. After all, this uneasiness was more the memory of a past pain than the pain itself, and why should he not be as happy with Christine Ruddfield for a few minutes as if he had never hoped to be happy with her all his life?

She made most people feel like this when she was in her brightest moods, and she was in a very bright one to-day: it might be the ride through the pleasant lanes and roads that led from Stretton to Arkleigh: it might be the visit to her old home, or the fresh air smelling of the sea which the river brought up with its tide. It certainly was not, what Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar would have said, the desire of shining in the eyes of her former lover, for of anything approach-

ing coquetry Christine Ruddfield was entirely innocent. She had her faults, at least a great many people said so, had sometimes too keen a tongue, too quick a temper, said things that it would have been safer to have left unsaid, and had done things that it would have been wiser to have left undone—at least in the opinion of such as Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar: but she was true to the core, and of any such pitiful meanness as seeking to win back the love in her maturer days that in her youth she had put from her, she was incapable. But when she was in her best and most gracious moods she could no more help pleasing than the sun can help shining, or the flowers help blooming, and who shall blame Mr. Chastelar that he put from him for a little while the thought of that pale unlovely wife at home, and let Christine Ruddfield charm and delight him just as, against his better judgment, she was charming and delighting his father?

It was a very pleasant half-hour: Edgar

Ruddfield enjoyed it as much as any of them. He was never so happy as when with his younger sister. He was a weak man, strong only in his sense of right, as had been shown by the manner in which he had done what he thought his duty by Jerry—a man who ought to have had a clear-headed capable wife to look after and take care of him, but inasmuch as he had not—having nothing but a poor frail reed to shelter from wind and sun—was thankful to be guided by a servant in minor matters, and in greater ones let things pretty well guide themselves. If he could only have had Christine with him always, he sometimes thought—Christine, who had everything that he most wanted; energy, self-reliance, hopefulness; he always felt better, brighter, stronger when with her; if he could but have had her to have leaned on always!

Yes, it was such a pleasant half-hour; and then came another interruption, caused again by that indomitable Jerry.

In he came, his new clothes spoiled and torn, grease over the buff breeches, and the jacket rent from the collar to the waist, Reginald following, while the parlour maid came as cook's deputy to explain the state of matters. Master Reginald had done as his aunt told him, and taken Jerry into the kitchen. Christine Ruddfield had a wonderful influence over boys; even her sister-in-law had learned that; they had an instinctive liking for her, mingled with just a little awe, owing to her literary reputation, which they magnified immensely; and on his own account Reginald was not sorry to do as his aunt had directed him, having the liking most boys have for the lower regions, perhaps because they are forbidden ones. He had made himself comfortable, and Jerry too, invading the larder, and setting the best of its contents on a side table, to which Jerry and he sat down contentedly enough. Cook grumbled, but neither Reginald nor Jerry cared, and the impending storm might not perhaps have gone further

than a dog growling had not Reginald called on his dog and set him upon cook's treasured favorite—her cat. Then cook waxed furious; she did not dare do more than threaten Master Reginald with reporting his conduct to his father and Reginald knew well enough what such threats were worth, but she could and did so, more as regarded Jerry, though he was not attacking the cat openly, being better employed at the table and merely looking on, at all times, across of the manner in which Reginald was endeavouring to get up a fight between the two animals.

She left alone Jerry and ordered him out of her kitchen. "Show yer gab!" was the contemptuous answer, "and let a fellow get on with his work, can't yer?" "What a row it will be!" she said, "to be sure!" he added. "The old maid, who had just brought her dog to the door, causing his dog to bark and her cat to arch back and forth, in a sort that she could not help but notice, regardless of the din of

the kitchen chimney, and sat there on one of the inner buttresses with her eyes gleaming like emeralds through the darkness.

"She'll send all the soot down," said Jerry complacently, "an' you'll get a fine wiggling if she does, old lady. Gentlefolks ain't partial to the taste of it in their greens."

This was oil on the flames of cook's wrath. She boxed Jerry's ears for his impudence ; then, seizing him by the collar of his new coat, declared that he should go up the chimney after the cat. Jerry struggled and upset the dripping-pan over his own legs and cook's, then he seized the joint which was at the fire, and threatened to brain her with it if she did not let him go. Reginald looked on delighted. It was the "jolliest row" he had seen for a long while. Neither his brothers nor he had ever dared heard cook in her own domain like this. That indignant personage, after shaking Jerry by his coat till it gave way beneath her



grasp, flung him into the middle of the kitchen, desired the parlour maid who entered just then to take him to missus, and then come back to see to the dinner herself, as she was so upset with being nigh murdered an' threatened out of her life as to be incapable of anything. Having delivered which speech cook went into hysterics with the utmost deliberation, while Jerry was led out of the kitchen, observing as he went, with a contempt that Reginald Ruddfield thought sublime, "I shall be preshus glad to get rid of the whole kit of yer. I never was with sich a low lot in my life."

The parlourmaid gave cook's version of the story, and Jerry gave his own. "The old lady downstairs was aggrawatin', an' wouldn't let a feller eat his grub in peace. That was all he wanted—a quiet life, but somehow it seemed if he never could get it. Should he go to Mrs. Simpkins now—and what should he say about his coat? Would the old woman downstairs give him another suit, or the money to buy it?"

Mr. Edgar Ruddfield was not disposed to enter into this question just then. He dismissed Jerry with a mild caution, and, when he had gone, Launcelot Chastelar observed, "Your *protégé* will be as troublesome as Frankenstein's, Ruddfield—but there's one thing, I don't believe he'll be on your hands very long. He'll either qualify himself for board and lodging here at the public expense, or else find his way back to his old haunts. I must say he's interesting, though; his impudence is so infinite that it reaches the sublime."

Edgar Ruddfield looked appealingly to his sister—if ever he could, he sheltered himself behind her—and she came to his rescue.

"There's a good deal more than impudence in that boy. There's pluck, and there's readiness—I like him. It would have been too bad, Edgar, if you had left him in the mire after he had picked Claude out of it. If you like, I'll go round myself and see Mrs. Simpkins this afternoon, and make his peace with her about his clothes."

Edgar Ruddfield was grateful to his sister, and Mr. Launcelot Chastelar knew that she had not approved of the tone he had taken. There was a little unspoken antagonism to him in hers which reminded him of old times, when the impetuous, impulsive girl, and her staid grave matter-of-fact lover were at a variance that was half playful, half earnest. How would it have been all these years if they had lived together? Would he have toned her down to his way of thinking, or have soared to hers? The last would hardly have been desirable in his present mode of life—perhaps things were better as they were; but still he was hardly prepared to agree with his father, when he observed as they walked away together—

“Miss Ruddfield is just what one might have expected—the most splendid failure I ever witnessed.”

“She is splendid, but I don’t see the failure, sir.”

“She is a failure as a woman. Every

woman is who drifts away into the sea of public life, as she has done. It is a fortunate thing for herself and for other people that she has never married—a woman with that independence of thought and action doesn't want a husband, and no man's fireside would ever have contented her. I admire Miss Christine Ruddfield immensely; I do full homage to her genius, which people tell me is something quite out of the common, and of her beauty I can judge for myself, but I think it was the most fortunate day in your life, Launcelot, when she threw you over. If you considered nothing else, could you fancy her the mother of your children?"

Looking back to that picture in the hall, with the girl and boy nestling to her, and the mingled tenderness and defiance of her look, Launcelot Chestelar could—a mother who would be as a dove in her tenderness to her children, as a tigress in her defence of of them. Why had his father brought that picture up again?—with the love and the

passion, the strength and the pride, that Christine Ruddfield's nature developed by motherhood might have shown? Why did he feel as if he should see it for ever, coming between him and her who was the mother of the only child that had been given him. It might be for the best that things were as they were, but oh! why should the best be sometimes so very hard to bear as to make us wish that it had been given us to know the worst?

## CHAPTER XI.

### CHRISTINE AT BAY.

MRS. SIMPKINS and Jerry were both out when Miss Christine Ruddfield called at the dwelling of the former that afternoon, so that she was unable to use any influence on behalf of the latter and his unfortunate clothes. In the early evening she started off for Stretton, taking her brother Edgar and his little girl with her, and arrived at North End House in the gloaming. Claude looked about her with eyes that took in everything. "I like this," she said presently, "it's quiet, and what a comfort quiet is, Aunt, after one has been in a house full of boys. I'd read about boys you know,

Aunt, and heard how noisy and troublesome and every way disagreeable they were, but I had no idea they were half so bad till I came to be with my cousins. Jerry's different; I like him somehow, and I'm not sure whether it is that he's worse or better than others; but I like him."

They had tea together in the large drawing-room with its faded glories, its ugly spider-legged chairs, its dim needlework, its tasteless ornaments and dull curtains. Only Christine had brightened up the room with plenty of flowers, and the old-fashioned china cups without handles out of which they had their tea filled Claude with admiration.

"Tea's as nice again out of these cups, Aunt," she said, "and I do like my tea, don't you?" and she sipped it with the air of a connoisseur. "They gave me my tea in the nursery at Aunt Ruddfield's, and you've no idea how unpleasant it was with all those children."

Soon after tea Aunt Christine took the

little one to bed. "I have put you in my room, pet," she said, "I thought you might feel dull in this great house alone."

"No, I shouldn't," said Claude, "but I like being with you, too—I shall lie awake till you come and think over things, and enjoy the quiet. Oh dear! how glad I am there's nobody here to chatter and make-believe with their dolls."

Miss Alethea soon followed her niece. She kept early hours, and late ones, very often not getting up to breakfast, but always retiring early. Then Edgar and Christine were left alone together.

"You've brought Claude for a week," said the latter, "but I wish you would leave her to me all the summer. Just let me have her and try to make a child of her, Edgar—a little more what children of her age should be."

"I'm afraid she is unlike them," said Edgar Ruddfield gravely.


"She couldn't well be more so. Haven't



you been rather cruel to her, Edgar, robbing her of the playtime of her life? Taking youth from her before she has entered it? Poor little creature! Fancy a girl that despises dolls!"

"I suppose she is not quite what she should be," said Claude's father, "but only think of her mother! If she were like other children, how would Maria bear it?"

There it was. Claude's childhood had been sacrificed to her mother's weakness. The first thing impressed upon the child since she could put two words together had been to be quiet, the next that her own little individual existence was of infinitely less importance than her mother's; no fear of any one forgetting the duty of self-sacrifice who lived in the same house with Mrs. Edgar Ruddfield. She was an invalid certainly, but her invalidism was quite as hard for other people to bear as for herself. She was to be petted, idolized, taken care of. She liked petting, and was disinclined for any active duty. With her peculiar




constitution and temperament it was really not so unpleasant a thing to lie on a sofa, be taken care of, have all sorts of tempting things brought her to eat, and a husband whose chief aim in life seemed to be the making hers pleasant. A great many people pitied Mrs. Edgar, but it is just a question, looking at her life and her requirements, whether she would have changed her invalidism for the most boisterous health. She was, in a languid ladylike way, thoroughly and intensely selfish, and it was not altogether disagreeable to have such an excuse as ill-health for the indulgence of that selfishness in a manner with which nobody could find fault.

Christine understood her sister-in-law a little better than her husband did—but it was hardly desirable that he should understand her. At the best she could never be well and strong—let him think there was nothing the matter with her but ill-health. In the nature of things he must be sacrificed, but there was no reason why Claude should be sacrificed too.

"Of course you want her quiet," she said, "and children are always a trouble where there is an invalid, but let the little thing come here. Alethea can bear noise better than Maria, and children amuse instead of tiring her ; if only for a few months it will be something—give her to me at least this summer, and let me teach her to be a child."

"Maria will miss her—you've no idea how handy and helpful she is with her mother," said Edgar Ruddfield. In his heart he knew that his sister was right, but at times Claude was invaluable in the way of fetching and carrying, and waiting on her mother. Christine knew this too, but she would make a fight for the child notwithstanding. Mrs. Edgar must do with a little less waiting on—she might be all the better for it.

"Surely Maria can spare her for a little—Gibbs is such a treasure ; and you don't want two invalids, do you ? Is it just the best way of bringing up a child, keeping it for ever in a sick chamber, and laying a burthen on its



poor little brain and shoulders that only a grown-up person's should be called upon to bear?"

Edgar Ruddfield looked troubled. His sister had frightened him, as she meant to do. "Am I really injuring the child?" he said plaintively.

"No question about it—she isn't a child, but an unnatural precocity."

"And you really think I had better——"

"Leave her with me—of course I do: haven't I been telling you so? For a few months at least—and let me turn her back into a child again for you."

"I'll—I'll think of it," said Edgar Ruddfield as he rose wearily and took his chamber candlestick. He was not a strong man, and the wear and tear of his wife's illness had told on him of late. It was an Old Man of the Sea weighing him down, and he was distressed and troubled about his little girl. Had he injured her in thinking too much of her mother? Wendell Holmes speaks of a neuralgic conscience, somewhere: that expression just defines

Edgar Ruddfield's. His conscience was never at rest: let him do what he would—let him try his best as unselfishly as might be, to work out the thing that was right and eschew that which was wrong, still, still there would always be the uneasy thought that he might have done something yet better. It would have been the greatest blessing possible for him if he could only have had such a woman as his sister for his wife, when he would have made her the keeper of his conscience as well as of everything else belonging to him.

“He'll have a sleepless night, poor fellow,” thought Christine, “but I shall have Claude.” Then, as soon as her brother had gone, she called the elder of her two domestics, and went with her over the various fastenings of the doors and windows of the house, to see that all was secure and safe. The last room they entered was her own especial sanctum, and here the shutter of the window which opened to the ground was found unfastened. This was a matter about which

Miss Ruddfield was exceedingly tenacious, and she expressed her displeasure plainly. Sarah was positive that she had secured this window at dusk with her own hands, an assertion which her mistress found it impossible to believe. The shutter could not have become unfastened of itself, and who had been in the house but the two maids to undo it? Sarah's memory must have failed her.

Sarah was positive that it did not, and she secured the shutters again, wondering if *this* time they would keep closed; and her mistress, having seen it duly done, was about to leave the room when a note, directed to herself, lying on the table caught her eye.

"Why was not this brought to me as soon as I came in?" she asked.

"Jane must have taken it—I've seen nothing of it," was the reply; and Miss Ruddfield could only come to the conclusion that during her absence her two maids had been too busy with their own affairs' to trouble themselves about hers.

She took the lamp from Sarah's hand: "Leave me this—you can go now," and she sat down to read her note. It was not likely to be of much importance, but still she liked to read her letters as soon as they came, and so she opened and glanced over this. She read it two or three times, and then laid it down with a faint "Even here!"

It was just the tone in which she might have said, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!"


"Even here!" In her very sanctum—just the very core of her domestic life, something low and vile had sought to intrude itself, to judge by the expression of her face, the look of abhorrence and contempt she cast upon the note. For a moment she stood as if irresolute what to do; the next, a low faint whistle from the garden outside attracted her attention. She lit two wax candles on a side-table, then went to the window and opened it, standing back, and drawing her dress around her as the figure of a man passed in—just as if there were

some contamination in his touch which she shrank from. Then she closed the window and fastened the shutters, and sat down looking her visitor in the face.

He was a slight, small man, with an effeminate expression and delicate hands, and had a carefully trimmed moustache and beard—much rarer things twenty years ago than now—and these, coupled with his dress, which though fashionably made was worn and shabby, gave him the appearance of a foreign music-master or professional singer. A second glance would have told you that this man had at least been born in the ranks of gentlemen, had in early life been reared amidst their ways and manners. Some faint flavour of better days still hung around him, but the prevailing impression he conveyed was that of one who had forfeited the regard and respect of his kind and was deservedly a social outlaw, so far at least that, if every one's hand was not against him, his hand was against every man (or woman) who would be worth despoiling.



He had a bad face,—thoroughly bad, and not a bit the better for the remains of undeniable beauty. The features were classic in outline almost to effeminacy. The hair was dark, silky, and glossy, the carriage at least that of a gentleman, but the expression of the face was a compound of cynicism, vanity, and cruelty, and the quiet insolent complacency of the manner was insufferable. You would quite understand, when you looked at him, that many a man might feel an almost irresistible inclination to kick him. Perhaps no one but Christine Ruddfield and one other had ever hated this man; he seemed too small, too mean—unless you knew him as well as she, and that other, did—to call up a great hatred; but many had despised, and nearly every one who knew, disliked him. Just at first he seemed more contemptible than dangerous—you had to know him well before you learned that he was not the less to be feared because of his seeming insignificance.



He seated himself opposite Christine Ruddfield, and without removing his hat. She noticed it. "Is it so long since you have seen a lady, sir, that you forget how to behave in her presence."

He removed his hat with an air of bravado. He was not altogether easy in the presence of the lady who addressed him, but he tried to look as if he were. "*Merci*, madame, for the hint. In the land of Bohemia from which I come one is apt to be forgetful of such matters. May I smoke my cigar though? I've been waiting a long time outside, and the evening air is damp, and my chest, as you know, is delicate."

"You will behave yourself with common decency while you are here, sir. You have sought this interview, not I, and if you choose to come under my roof you shall at least exercise enough restraint over yourself to behave with ordinary politeness."

"*Bien*, madame, if you will have it so," and he laid down the cigar which he had taken out

of his case, and had been about to light, "but isn't it rather a figure of speech to call this *your* roof? Is there not some legal fiction which entitles me to regard it as in some measure mine?"

"I wouldn't advise you to try what that legal fiction can do for you," she said, "and I think you know better than to attempt it. Was it that which induced you to forge my name a little while ago? You've found such work dangerous once. Take care that it isn't so again."

"I hope I didn't inconvenience you—I was dreadfully hard run when I did it. I'm hard run now—that's why I have trespassed on you to-night. I am afraid my visit is inopportune—I know your early hours. How delightful to live in Arcadia, and rise with the lark, and retire with the—what is it—cockchafers?—if one can call it living, but I'm afraid I shouldn't; and yet I suppose the good people of Stretton call their stagnation by that name?"

"You would be out of your element, certainly," said Christine Ruddfield. "As far as I know, our little town boasts neither forgers nor card-sharpers. Will you have the goodness to tell me at once what brought you to it? and how it is you have invaded my very house, if I may judge by this note of which my servants know nothing? I think you and I made a compact once that neither house nor town was to be honoured with your presence."

"Ah! that was a cruel bargain for me. Has a man no natural affections? No desire to revisit the scenes of his youth, the dwelling where the partner of his days, the sharer of his home, as he once hoped to make her, resides? That bargain was a very hard one—can you wonder that I try to evade it now and then?—that I sometimes feel tempted to break it altogether?"

"You would if you dared," she said, in the same hard cold tone she had maintained through all the interview, a tone whose contempt was almost immeasurable, "but you

dare not ; I give you credit to be wise enough for that."

"Then you've not heard of the death of Sir Thomas Strahan?—I don't think his executors, now he is so happily removed to another, and let us hope a better, world (I wonder of what vintage the port wine is there), will trouble themselves about the carrying out his not very benevolent intentions towards me. He was terribly unforgiving—but I believe it was half spite towards my respected uncle—those two old gentlemen hated each other as much as—as—if they had been man and wife. I couldn't use a stronger illustration, could I, madame? Well, Sir Thomas is gone, his nephew never heard of me, having lived all his life abroad; a prosecution for an offence which was not against himself, and which was committed so long ago, would make him rather unpopular in the county, so that if I again resume the identity I ten years back laid down, and with it all the rights and privileges which belong to that identity, what have I to fear? Do you

follow me, madame?" he said, his light mocking tone changing to one whose deadly earnestness his hearer understood: "do you see what I mean?—that it is I, not you, who have the best of the bargain made between us now, and that it may be I shall not care to keep it unless it is made worth my while."

He looked at her intently, with a cruel, evil cunning gleaming out of his dark hazel eyes. He saw her turning paler and paler as he spoke. Whatever the compact was that had been made between them, it was clear now that she, not he, had the most to dread by its being broken. He continued, resuming again the same tone of *persiflage* which he had used before:—

"I must apologize for making use of your name as I did; I hope my doing so did not put you to any inconvenience. As to my visit here to-night, I assure you I selected this time out of consideration to that strict regard to the proprieties which single ladies—or those who like to call themselves such

—are so given to observe. I have been a *mauvais sujet* in my time; at least people have been ill-natured enough to say so; and if I had walked in at the front door and asked for Miss Ruddfield or Mrs.—no, that designation offends you, so I won't use it—what a stir there would have been; what a *bonne bouclie* for the old maids of the place; and old maids are spiteful, and apt to judge hardly, are they not, madame? I selected this mode of entrance; it was not difficult to enter your garden from the adjoining fields; I have done so many a time in your late relative's days—worthy old soul! I wonder if she ever dreamed what an interest I should have in all her accumulated belongings—and as to entering the house by the little window to leave the note which I did—my dear lady, why don't you have your shutters looked to? The merest bungler could undo them from the outside. They are just as they were in your late aunt's time; I have unfastened them then occasion-

ally without the worthy creature's knowledge ; she had a wonderfully pretty parlour-maid, and—but I forget, this is scarcely a story for your ears."

"Will you keep to the point?" said Christine Ruddfield coldly, "let me know why you came and what you want?"

"What we none of us ever have enough of, and I less than any," he said with a shrug of his shoulders—a trick evidently learnt in Paris—no Frenchman could have done it better. "I was in a dreadful state of impecuniosity when I made use of your name. To have set myself straight I should have done it for twice the amount, but I feared to inconvenience you—I took what was enough for my immediate need, and to stave off one or two people who were unpleasantly pressing, and then I thought I would make a personal appeal to you. Can you help me—say only another hundred—and then, as, unfortunately for me, we are better friends apart than together, I will relieve you



of my presence and claim nothing further at your hands for a twelvemonth."

"Or till you want more from me," cried Christine passionately. "Can I coin money for you, do you think?"

"Out of that very clever head—that inexhaustible imagination, and those wonderful inventive powers,—yes. You see I *do* read the reviews of your books now and then—and am almost as much gratified as yourself when I find they do you justice. I feel as if I had a personal interest in the matter, as if the credit you won was in some degree reflected upon me. You ought never to want for money when you have a Pactolus in your inkstand."

"It doesn't run so readily for me as for you," she said bitterly. "I can't make use of other people's ideas as freely as you do of their names. You don't know how hard I shall have to work to make up for what you have stolen—yes, stolen is the word—from us."

"It's an ugly word, but do you know it

sounds almost endurable from your mouth," he said; "and what a pleasure it is that you can work, and *such* work too! Really, when I think that I am the necessity, the fate that drives you to your desk and ink-stand, I feel as if the world could hardly be grateful enough to me for the productions that enliven its leisure. It appears to me that in my case more than in any, society never knows who are its best benefactors."

"I've not above twenty pounds in the house," she said, "I'll give you half of it if you'll go at once; I'll send you twenty more in six weeks' time; to do that, I shall have to economize to the utmost, and I *won't* let Alethea suffer through you more than she has done; I *must* take her to the seaside this summer. Dr. Audrey hopes that that may do something towards restoring the latent nervous force that he believes is yet within her. Haven't you a grain of feeling left? Are you alive to nothing but your own base needs and vile requirements? But

there, why do I waste words upon you : don't I know well enough that you have not ? ”

“ Dear Alethea ! It was very unfeeling of me not to have asked after her before : how is she ? Does she wear well ? And is she as thoroughly satisfied as ever with her own good looks ? In a quiet way, she was just a little vain, but I don't know but that I rather like that in a pretty woman. But as to your offer, it's absurd. I don't doubt but that you're short of money—I have been rather importunate lately—but you've plate and jewels ; those diamond rings Mrs. Timmins used to cover her fat fingers with are each a little fortune. I'll take those instead of the sum I named.”

“ I can't ; she didn't name them as such specially in her will, but I know she looked upon them as heirlooms ; she told me as much, and I have always destined them for John and Edgar's children.”

“ Heirlooms ! ” and no grand seigneur of old France could have uttered the word with

a keener scorn in the tone or the shrug that accompanied it. "Heirlooms! can't you leave such things to us? I wonder what there is that you good new people won't think yourselves entitled to! I think I must, however, come between these heirlooms and the little Ruddfields; it's a pity they shouldn't have them. I suppose by the time they reached their hands your family would be three generations old; but I must have these ancestral treasures, failing the ready money, which I should certainly have preferred. Could you get them for me to-night, and at once, if it's not troubling you too much? I should like to catch the last train for London."

"I have told you what I will do, and what you must be satisfied with," said Christine, resolutely. "I'll give you the money in gold at once, and forward the rest at the time I named to any address you may leave me. Will you take it and go? Haven't I borne your presence long enough?"

"You will have to bear it longer still if I don't have the rings. This is a comfortable house, and there's no reason now that I shouldn't stop here: I should have the additional pleasure of being near my uncle—no slight consideration when I remember how we last parted. He can't cut off the entail; what a gratifying thought that must be to him! The air of this place always did agree with me. This room wouldn't be a bad smoking crib, and with such attractions to the place as Alethea and yourself, a great many fellows would be glad to run down from town to enliven the dulness of Stretton. Or I don't know but what I might sell off the old things: the house being one's own—or at any rate partly one's own—there would be nothing to hinder an auction on the premises; the old sticks would fetch twice their value sold like that. It would be the best way, after all, of disposing of them; and you two co-heiresses are too fondly attached to stand in each other's way."

"You wouldn't do it!" she cried; "and you couldn't."

"Couldn't! The house and furniture, &c., were left to you both, unshackled by any unpleasant restrictions that might afterwards affect a husband. At any rate, that share which the law thus assigns to me I could dispose of as I please; and the law also gives a husband the right to come to any residence belonging to his wife; or, if he pleases, to take her with him. Benevolent law! it seems as if it had been constituted expressly to meet the case of husbands who, like myself, have unhappily not been so fortunate as to retain the affections of their partners. You are a sensible woman, you must know that things are as I say; that I haven't in the slightest degree exaggerated the true state of the case."

"I know you haven't!" she said: all the rich glow and crimson of her complexion changed now into a dull, livid paleness: she was white even to her lips, and she drew back from him, though the table was between them,

and went towards the mantelpiece. "I know you haven't! Don't I know the laws are framed so as to make women the most utter and most abject slaves if they meet with a tyrant so vile and cruel as yourself, so base in his meanness, so unrelenting in his cruelty! My God! to think of it! that any law should place a woman, such as I, in the power of such a thing as you!"

If you could fancy a lioness finding herself entrapped and enthralled by the meanest denizen of the forest, a jabbering baboon, a grinning monkey, whom one stroke of her paw should have crushed; you may picture Christine as she stood there, her whole face and attitude breathing the most utter scorn of the contemptible little being before her; her eyes, even while they manifested a terror of him, flashing forth a defiance he would have done well not to provoke. She had never looked so magnificently beautiful as she did now, standing there, an incarnate scorn of the vile object which yet she dreaded.

There was a fear and a humiliation in her look which he saw and rejoiced in, blinded by his intense self-complacency to the desperation to which he had goaded her. He only saw his triumph and her terror. A little more sense or a little less vanity might have told him that Christine Ruddfield, if fairly driven to bay, would be a dangerous person to deal with.

“I dare say you find the law unpleasant,” he continued, in the same mocking tone he had used before, “and I must own it shows a singular want of gallantry in its framers. But it’s not for me to find fault with it—I only hope it will last my time, and *après moi le déluge*. Let women have the rights that some of them are already beginning to make such an unladylike clamour about, so long as they don’t have them soon enough to interfere with any rights of mine—rights which just now I shall find it uncommonly convenient to exercise. May I trouble you to ring the bell? I think it is close by you. I haven’t money enough



to take me back to town—I don't like the accommodation at the Crown and Anchor ; besides, why should a man go to an hotel when he has a house of his own quite handy, and an establishment already formed with a wife at the head of it."

"If I do ring the bell," said Christine, "do you know what the order will be that I shall give?"

"To prepare one of the best spare bedrooms for me, and bring me up a supper-tray. What have you got in the house? I suppose one could have neither oysters nor devilled kidneys at so short a notice."

"I shall send the servant that answers this bell to the station-house for a couple of policemen, and I shall give you in charge for having burglariously entered my dwelling-house, and for attempting to extort money from me."

"It's my own house that I've entered—at least a house where I've every right to come," he said, in a tone that had now at least lost

all its mocking irony: looking on Christine he began to lose a little of his confidence. Even he could not help seeing the danger in her face. It was his turn to be afraid of her. It was clear she was no longer afraid of him. He had roused her to desperation, and all minor considerations, that till now had been as powerful with her as with most gently-nurtured women, were forgotten. The fear of the world's talk, the dread of a past weakness being known, of a sorrow that had as much of shame as sorrow in it being divulged, were now all set at nought. She was past caring for anything of this kind. He thought, himself, now of the lioness as he looked upon her—of the lioness at bay; and yet, other eyes than his, which were only open to his own danger, to his own mean interests, and from which all tenderness and gentleness and self-sacrifice was hidden as by a veil, would have seen that here the lioness was at bay not for herself alone—that this fierce unnatural strength would never have been given her, but that she

had something weaker and more helpless than herself to protect. A mother defending her child from something worse than death—from slavery or shame, might have worn such a look: it was one that could hardly be called up in any woman's face by any peril of her own. Mingling with the desperation and defiance was a tenderness and love, as if she were pressing feeble unseen hands, and whispering to something utterly frail and helpless, and, but for her, forlorn and lost, that she would front this peril for its sake, and bear it bravely and unscathed through all.

"You've got to prove that," she said. His tone had wavered when he last spoke, hers did not at all. "Looking at your past life and mine, which do you think will be most readily believed, you or I? At any rate you'll be taken care of for two or three days, and kept where you will be found when another and unanswerable charge is brought against you. I shall go to-morrow to Sir William Strahan, and I'll tell him *everything*. He's a good man,

I hear, and has a wife and daughters of his own, and I'll ask him, and if I have to go down on my knees to him I'll never leave him till he has promised me, to prosecute you for that forgery upon his uncle. I'll supply him with witnesses, I'll furnish him with proofs. I know where they're all to be found : it will be impossible for you to escape conviction—you will have seven years, during which time Alethea and I can find another home where it will not be so easy for you to reach us as here. There's only one thing I regret in it all"—and he knew she was in earnest : words spoken with that face were not idle ones—"that in your case Fauntleroy's punishment doesn't follow Fauntleroy's crime. There are some curs for whom in this world one can see no fit ending but the rope."

"You wouldn't do it," he said, almost whimpering. He was as cowardly as he was cruel, and she had fairly frightened him now. "Think of your brothers, and the stir, and the scandal."

"I've thought of it all too long—let it weigh with me too much. I can think of nothing now, but that all these years I have let a vampire prey on my very lifeblood. He shall prey no more. Alethea and I will leave this. John is strong enough to live it down. It will matter nothing to Edgar, living up in town: and for myself, my life is lived, my past is gone. What have I to fear or hope for now? Happily, the one tie that we might have had in common with you is broken. There is no child living to grow up with the knowledge that his father was a convicted felon to blight him."

"Ah! that child," he said, in a tone as pathetic as he knew how to make it: "remembering that, you might have some mercy on its father."

"I should be obliged to show some, if it were still in existence: but, thank Heaven, it is not."

"Are you quite sure of that?" he said meaningly.

"As sure as I can be of anything for which I have only your word. What do you mean?" she said fiercely, as she saw the mocking look again entering his eyes. "You didn't deceive me *there*? You could have had no motive to tell a lie about that."

"None but pure benevolence." He was almost his own vile self again. He evidently had, or thought he had, some fresh instrument of torture to hold over her. "A child would have been in your way—an awkward encumbrance to two single ladies—interfered altogether with the scheme of life that I saw you had arranged as soon as the probability of its dying presented itself to you. It would have been cruel of me to have left such an obstacle in your path when for a mere trifle paid annually I could remove it. I think you ought to give me some thanks for my consideration."

"Tell me in a word," she said fiercely, "is the child alive or dead?"

"In a word, I decline to answer. I don't

think we've been altogether on the best of terms this evening. You've ruffled my feelings, to say the least, and you've said ugly things which you shouldn't have said. I didn't mean to stop, Christine, but you have such an unpleasant habit of taking everything *au pied de la lettre*. Now, give me those rings and the ten pounds, and I'll go."

"Here's the money," she said, and drew out her purse. "Fortunately I cashed a cheque to-day at Arkleigh. I only give you this to get rid of you, and because I think it is not unlikely that you have for once spoken the truth in saying you have not money enough to pay your fare back to London with."

"You'll send me the other twenty pounds in six weeks' time?" he said. "I'll write and let you know my address;—that twenty pounds you promised, you know," he added, seeing something in her eyes which made him rather uneasy about the sum named.

"Yes, I did promise it," she said, "but that was before you dared to threaten me, and

before you led me to believe that you had deceived me about that child. I'll know the truth about *that* before you have another farthing—better proof of its death than your word, or the living child if it is alive, and a certainty that it is the same, and not some impostor. Till I'm assured one way or another, you shall never have another farthing of me after this ten pounds."

He looked at her keenly. With all his little cunning cruel mind he was trying to fathom the depths of hers. What would be the best thing to tell her? and he could hardly answer the question. He would give himself time to consider. He should have leisure to do so before the six weeks had elapsed, when he should have that other twenty pounds, and he did not suppose she would let him have it any sooner, even if he did set her mind at rest on the subject of the child: he must have drained her pretty closely by that last draw on the bank. He took refuge in sullenness.

"I shall tell you nothing just now," he said.



“You’re out of temper, and whatever I say you’ll pervert and twist. Women always do when they want to quarrel with a man. You’re bent on quarrelling with me, but you shall hear from me before very long. Give me the ten pounds. Won’t you shake hands? You’re splendidly handsome, Christine, but you have a most abominable temper. Well, good-bye. I’ll go back the way I came, thank you ; but *do* have these shutters seen to : you’ll have some unpleasant visitors some night or other if you don’t. Good-bye, once more ; *au revoir*.” And he went his way, humming the last new air he had picked up at the Opera.

## CHAPTER XII.

### WEARY AND WORN.

CHRISTINE RUDDFIELD closed the window after her visitor, and sat down, a crushed, humbled woman. She had stood her ground ; she had driven this man from her, and set him at defiance ; but oh, the bitterness of having it to do ! To bandy words, to use threats, to parley with a thing so mean. And he had left a sting behind. What if the child she had so long believed dead, and in whose death she had rejoiced, should be living still ? What would it be with such training as he had given it ? Nay, more, would *any* training make *his* child upright and honest, fearless and true ? She could not feel like other women, to whom a dead baby is a lost

treasure, with nothing but possibilities of infinite good buried in its little coffin. What *could* this man's child have been if it had lived? Looking back on the time when its baby face had nestled on her bosom, when she had fondled it in her arms, and given it out of the exuberance of her loving nature as deep a love as any mother could have given, still—still she had always felt thankful that it had been taken from the evil to come. For what *but* evil could have come to 'it? Baby wiles, cooing laughter, velvet cheeks and rounded limbs—they were as dear to her as to all other good and tender women; and yet she had felt that she dared not grieve when this little one had been taken. Had not its father been a child once, and might not the child grow up into what its father was? She had said this to herself years ago, and so choked back the tears that were trying to make their way: the instinctive grief that, in spite of all her reasonings, would make itself heard. And now to feel that this

last cold comfort was taken from her ; that the child she had thought for ever safe, for ever sheltered, was still living, how or where she knew not, and hardly dared to guess !

Or had the miserable creature who had left her only said it to torment her ? He was capable of anything that was cowardly and cruel. Possibly this was a sheer invention on his part. He would never have encumbered himself with a child all these years. Why should he, when the lowest sum charged for its yearly maintenance would at least have found him a few dinners, or have kept him for a month in cigars ? He had only said what he had to frighten her. She would try and think so at any rate, till she had further proof. Sufficient for this day at least had been the evil thereof.

After a time she went upstairs with a slow wearied step, so different from her usual light, elastic one. She had thought that she was getting accustomed to her burthen, but to-night it seemed more than she could bear. She had

a crushed, miserable feeling of degradation, of shame, at her involuntary contact with so much vileness. The very victory over such a creature was almost as bad as a defeat. She was ashamed of the weapons she had been obliged to use, and yet, if need be, she knew she would use them again, and carry out every threat she had uttered.

As she passed Alethea's door she heard a slight moaning, and went in to see what ailed the invalid. Alethea was between sleeping and waking, but opened her eyes wide when she saw her sister. She stretched out her arms to her, much as a child in pain might to its mother. "I am so glad you've come, so glad," she said. "You don't know the dreams I've had. I thought *he* was here, trying to force his way up the stairs, and you were standing on them keeping him back."

"Wake when some evil near,"

whispered

sister's

hus-

not difficult to do ; Alethea always had such a sense of security and safety in her sister's presence. Nothing evil could happen if she were near. Whatever cares, whatever griefs might menace them, Christine was strong enough to bear for both. It had been so for years past. The burthen that should have been shared by both, Christine had to bear by herself alone. Sometimes she had envied others their weakness. It seemed as if rest might sometimes come to them, though never to her.

"Bear ye one another's burthens ;" that seemed Christine Ruddfield's task ; that self-reliant, hopeful, tender nature seemed given her far less for her own happiness than to be the solace and aid of others. Generally she had felt thankful that it was so ; that work had been given her which she was so well able to do ; but to-night the work seemed so heavy, and the rest—  
"where ever come ? there to be no  
until the last— all ?"

She sat at least an hour by Alethea ; she was afraid to leave her sooner, lest the evil dreams should return : but her sister slept on peacefully, and at last Christine left her and went to her own room. Little Claude was fast asleep, looking prettier and more child-like with her bright, thoughtful, questioning eyes closed than she did awake. Her aunt hung over her for a minute or two : "I hope he will let me have you, little one, and teach you to make the best of your playtime while it lasts. I had mine, and I'm thankful for it now. It is well to look back, if one cannot look forward. And you will have your work given you, child, as I have had mine. Why should they rob you of the happy hours that may make you stronger to perform it ?"

## CHAPTER XIII.

### JERRY AGAIN.

CHRISTINE RUDDFIELD said nothing to her brother or sister of her last night's visitor. Alethea was never to be troubled : all rough things were to be made smooth to her. That was the rule of Christine's life, and though it might have comforted her a little to have taken counsel of her brother, it would have distressed him so much, that the gain to herself would hardly have been worth the pain to him. And he could do her no good ; he was not a man of the world—the last man, indeed, to whom any one would have gone in trouble or emergency if they wanted anything more than sympathy or pecuniary help. She



might have been glad of the first, but she would not take the other from him ; he had enough to do with his ailing wife, and his limited income, and the very, very few pictures that he sold. She must just go on by herself, as she had done so long, fighting her own fight, bearing her own burthen, and keeping as brave a front to the world as she could.

There was one blessed thing, she was a woman of an elastic as well as a brave nature ; she could bear grief, and feel it, and yet not be conquered by it. She was too mentally healthful and vigorous for that, so the next morning found her with little Claude in the garden, watching the bees at their work, weeding the flower-beds, which she took under her own especial care, and gathering pinks and roses for the decoration of the house. Claude was happy ; so was Christine for a time ; and Edgar Ruddfield, watching both, began to think that the best thing he could do for his little girl was to leave her here to learn to be a child, as her aunt expressed

it. Alethea sat in the shade and looked on. She had forgotten her ugly dreams of last night; how was it possible to recall them when Christine looked so secure and calm? Old Simon Flint, the gardener, went solidly on with his work, to all appearance utterly unconscious that there was any one besides himself in the garden, and Edgar Ruddfield thought how pretty a picture the whole scene made, and how he should have liked to transfer it to canvas.

Into this pretty bit of peaceful country life a hostile element from the great metropolis was not long in intruding itself. One of Miss Ruddfield's tidy maids came to tell her that a boy was at the door, a dirty boy with a black eye and torn clothes, that looked as if they had once belonged to a charity school, and who was insisting upon seeing Miss Claude.

"Jerry again!" said Mr. Edgar Ruddfield, thinking that his cousin, after all, had been right in calling him another Frankenstein. Would this goblin that he had called up

never cease to waylay and haunt him? Should he never be quit of the uncanny, troublesome thing? Wouldn't it settle down and turn respectable, and be a well-behaved charity boy, and grow up into a decent working man, when he had taken so much pains to put it in the right way for doing all these safe and orderly things?

Christine directed the maid to bring the boy into the garden where they were. Claude, who had been listening, observed, "I've no doubt it's Jerry. I daresay those bad boys have ill-used him at Arkleigh. Jerry is such an odd boy, and he doesn't like being ill-used, and he's very high-spirited; I don't think it is a very good thing to be so high-spirited, but still those boys shouldn't try Jerry as they do. Here he comes. Oh, aunt! somebody or other has been knocking him about shamefully!"

It was very clear that Jerry was sure of one sympathising auditor to his tale; and that he had a tale was equally clear. There he stood,

a hopeless-looking little subject, his clothes dirtier and more torn than they had been the day before, two black eyes, and one of them partially closed up, a swollen mouth, which gave him an unusual appearance of sulkiness. He was evidently tired, for he dragged his steps painfully along, and, owing to his swollen mouth, his weary look, and his closed-up eye, he had quite lost that general sprightliness of appearance which had more than once reminded Edgar Ruddfield of a cock-sparrow at its sauciest and pertest.

Claude was truly concerned for Jerry, but she thought it right to lecture him notwithstanding, and she wouldn't at first let him see how grieved she was for his miserable plight. She was longing to comfort him, to bathe his eyes, and bring him a chair, and something to eat and drink (Jerry had been always ready to eat ever since she had known him), but she would not let him see all this at first.

"Jerry," she said severely, "I'm afraid

you've been misbehaving yourself. Tell me the truth, now ; haven't you been a bad boy ?”

“It's no use my tryin' to be a good un,” said Jerry. “I did mean to go in for it, Miss Claude ; I did indeed. I meant to make you an' the guv'ner there reg'lar proud on me. But lor ! what's the use of a feller like me a-tryin' ? There *is* sich a lot o' cads in the world, if he wants to be decent they won't guv him a chance. I went home to Mrs. Simpkins, an' she guv me a reg'lar larrupin' for tearin' my togs—as if I'd gone an' done it. I told her so, but the old cat wouldn't hear reason ; an' the more I told her to hold her jaw an' keep her hands to herself, the more she went on at me. At last I couldn't stand it no longer, and so I cut. I told Mrs. Simpkins I wouldn't come back till she'd learned manners, and knew how to behave herself respectable. Then I hadn't gone far before I fell in with a lot of fellers all dressed up like me, on'y other people hadn't ill-used their things for 'em as bad as they had

mine. They got round me, an' began sich a lot o' patter! They don't know how to talk in these parts. Then some one holloed out, 'The 'Grammar School cats!' an' a whole lot o' fellers with pancakes on their heads came a tearin' on us as had got chimney-pots, as if they wanted to get up a row. An' they called us rats, charity rats, an' began hittin' away right an' left, bangin' away at our tiles, an' flatt'nin' 'em under foot whenever they got 'em on the ground. Of course we hit back—I know *I* smashed two o' the pancakes, they'll never be good for anythin' agin," said Jerry, with a gleam of satisfaction. "I made one feller's nose bleed, an' there's another won't be able to see out of his eyes for one while. I'm handy with my fists, I am, for a little un," said Jerry, getting excited as he spoke of the fight, and forgetting his wrongs and his troubles for a time. "Smashin' Ben taught me how to use my fists, an' used to say I could hit out like a real good un. Then a lot on 'em set

upon me, an' I got a thorough hidin'. Th' other fellers cut, an' the chaps with the pancake tiles had the best on it. Then I had to cut, too ; so I got to Mother Simpkins's, an' a fine jawin' she guv me. At last I couldn't stand it no longer, an' when she got to bangin' me about the head, I up with the rollin' pin, an' told her I'd smash her daylight's for her if she didn't leave off. Then she screeched ;—that's just like wimmen," said Jerry confidentially to Mr. Edgar Ruddfield ; "if they can't think o' no other way of aggravatin' a feller, they opens their mouths an' makes a row enuff to stun him. Then the bloke that lives with her, guv me a whackin', as if I hadn't had enuff already, an' carried me off by the scruff o' the neck, as if I'd been a pup he was goin' to drown, an' shut me up in a little room at the back o' the house, telling me he'd take me afore the beaks in the mornin' for hittin' on his wife, an' threatenin' to do for her. Just as if she warn't big enuff to take care on

herself! So I told him, but he told me to stow my patter or he'd do for me—leastways, he didn't say just that," said Jerry, trying to be accurate in his recollections, "but they've got such a queer gab down these parts; I've told lots on 'em they'd better go to London, and learn to speak like Christins. Well, I didn't want to have anythink more to do with beaks, though I didn't see that I'd done anythink either, but those coves is always so down upon a feller—so as soon as it was light this mornin' I got out o' th' window, droppin' on to a bit of a shed that was jest below; then I scrambled off that, and soon got clear of the garden. You'd told me you was a-comin' to Stretton, Miss Claude, so I thought I'd come too, an' jest say good-bye afore I went back to London, an' the court, an' Smashin' Ben, an' the rest on' em. It's o' no use me a-tryin' to be good, so I'm a-goin' to give it up as a bad job, an' jest get on the same as I've done afore—much obliged to you though, Miss Claude, for all you've done



for me,—an' you too, sir, but 'ceptin' you two, good people do seem sich a rummy lot that I think I'd rather stick to the bad uns."

Edgar Ruddfield looked vexed, nay more, thoroughly discomfited and miserable. Could he do nothing for the boy who had saved his child? Was it his training, his culture, or was it circumstances that were too much for him? Must he go back to the slough from whence he came? to the ignorance and the sin from which he had tried to save him? to the life whose probable ending would be the hulks or the gallows? Could nothing be done to tame this young Arab of the city, or was everything both within and without against him? He looked to his sister for help; if she had not been there, he would almost have turned to Claude: this emergency seemed altogether too much for him. As it was, Claude was the first to come to his rescue.

"Just what I said, Jerry; you are such a bad boy. You *will* go getting into all sorts

of mischief when you haven't got me to take care of you. Now why should you go fighting the Grammar School boys just because they were silly enough to call themselves cats? That didn't do you any harm."

"Well, when there's a row goin' on," said Jerry, "one feels as if one must take one side or another. T'aint in natur' to stand still with one's hands in one's pockets; but I'd jest as soon have hit the charity boys as the others, if it comes to that."

"And what are you going to do with yourself if you go back to London?" said Miss Ruddfield. "How are you going to get your living?"

She spoke kindly, and Jerry looked up at her admiringly. He had not had a good view of her yesterday, but he was now able to see that she was what he afterwards pronounced her to be, "an uncommon fine woman:" and Jerry considered himself a connoisseur in fine women, and had as much pleasure in looking at them as he had at

any other of the sights and shows with which London was in the habit of presenting him. But the objects of his admiration were not in the habit of addressing him, and even Jerry felt for once a little sheepish when Christine Ruddfield's questioning eyes were bent upon him.

"Same way I did afore," he said presently.

"And how was that?" asked Christine.

"Well, sometimes gents guv me money for turnin' Catherine wheels. I've tried sweepin' a crossin', but that don't pay; 't isn't easy to get a good 'un, an' a bad 'un isn't worth buyin' a broom for. Sometimes old ladies give me somethin' if I follow 'em right on, an' pitch a good yarn into 'em—the crummy ones are always the best to deal with; a fat old woman's safe to be good for a brown if you only tackle her long enuff. Sometimes I comes across a hankercher that hasn't an owner, an' then maybe I gets a tizzy or a bob for it. An' there's a many other ways," said Jerry, "by

which a feller can turn a penny now an' then; an' there's always Common Garden, where one can grab at a turnip when folks ain't a-lookin'; an' if one hasn't blunt enough for the lodgin'-house, the park's not so bad in summer, an' the 'Delphi Arches keeps out the wind in winter. They're cold, but one meets with good company there sometimes."

The Adelphi Arches—theft—beggary—that was what the urchin was looking forward to with far less dread than many boys of his age would feel at the prospect of a new school! Looking on him, what made Christine Ruddfield think of the infant she had held in her arms ten years ago, whom she had so long thought safely housed with the angels, and yet who might, if she believed the hint thrown out last night, be growing up to manhood in the dark places of the earth, as very an Ishmael as the little outcast before her? Perhaps it was this which drew her heart to Jerry—or may be some undefined superstition that, if she could

save him from the evil that he seemed so ready to go back to, some good angel or another might arise to do as much for that other child, if still living. If living, a child so far worse than fatherless would surely need such saving help. Dead or living, she would do it for that lost one's sake—for that child to whom death would be so far the best thing that could be hoped for for it.

"Lord, let me have this one for the one which I hope is with Thee," she murmured, as her brother turned to her, asking anxiously, "Christine, what shall I do? I can't let him go back."

"I'll take him," she said, and then Edgar Ruddfield felt that the boy he wished to save was safe: somehow, everyone felt strong in Christine's strength. "I'll try what I can do. He sha'n't go back yet." Then she turned to Jerry. "You must be tired. Do you know you've walked above eight miles, even if you came the nearest way?"

"More nor that," said Jerry. "I'd gone

near a mile out of my road through one chap's not tellin' me right, as I found when I axed another cove. Didn't I wish I hadn't gone too far to shy a stone at the bloke as led me wrong !”

“Well, you can't go back to London to-day,” said Aunt Christine. “Claude will take you into the kitchen and give you some breakfast : I suppose you've had none yet.”

“Well, I cum across a tinker by the way, an' he guv me some of his grub. He warn't at all a bad sort of a bloke, and he wanted me to go along with him : he said I should soon learn his trade ; I was a real sharp un. He ain't the fust that's said that, neither,” said Jerry, with a satisfied nod of the head. “I reckon I know a thing or two by this time. It 'ud be a new line to take up, an' I don't know that I should like it as well as London : there's always somethin' goin' on there. I told him I'd think of it, and perhaps I should come

across him on the London road. He was going to Hillchester, an' he says it's all in the way ; but I didn't like to go without saying good-bye to Miss Claude an' the guv'ner."

"Well, I dare say you are ready for another breakfast by this time," said Aunt Christine. "Take him into the house, Claude ; let him wash his face and hands in the scullery, give him as much to eat as he likes, and then bring him back to me."

"Is that yer aunt as I heard yer talkin' on?" asked Jerry, as he walked away contentedly enough with Claude, who nodded an affirmative.

"She's a sight better lookin' than ever you'll be," said Jerry ungallantly ; "but I like you, too, for all that ; an' people can't help their looks, can they?"

"I'd help mine if I could," said Claude ; "Shakespeare makes all his heroines beautiful, you know ; and so are all the princesses in the fairy tales ; so are all the ladies that

have verses written to them. Now I should like to have verses written to me—good ones. And then I could save papa the expense of a model. He's had me once or twice, and I pleased him very much because I sat so still ; but I think the papers said unpleasant things about that picture. I know I heard him telling some gentlemen they'd been down upon him about Pre-Raphaelitism, and he thought *that* was the last fault he ought to be accused of. Those were just his very words : I always listen when he's reading out of the papers about himself. He has never asked me to sit again : he doesn't like to tell me why, but I know for all that. Of course, he wants something more in a model than just being able to sit still."

"I suppose so," said Jerry ; "but here we are. Is this the kitchen door ? Come along, I'm getting peckish : it's a good bit since I left that tinker. I on'y hope yer aunt's grub is as good as her looks ; an' don't go frettin' about yours. I like yer just as much as if



yer were the flashiest of 'em all, and if I on'y knew how to write—which I suppose I sha'n't nohow now I've hooked it from that school—I'd make verses to yer, see if I wouldn't."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE CRAVENS OF CRAVEN HALL.

THE little town of Stretton had perhaps the wealthiest rector in the county, and it rather prided itself upon the fact, as if his wealth gave it an additional importance. The living was but a hundred and fifty a year, the whole of which was handed over to the curate, Mr. Brown; the Rector's income being derived from quite other sources than tithes or glebe lands. He had been the second son of a family of some local importance, and at the age of fifty, when a childless widower, had succeeded to the estate on the death of his unmarried brother. It was not a large one as estates

go amongst English land-owners; but it was large for a clergyman to possess, and the income, five thousand a year, made him seem almost a leviathan of wealth amongst his clerical brethren. On succeeding to it, he ought to have married again—that was what everybody said—that was what everybody expected him to do; and every young and *soi-disante* young lady, and every good-looking widow, in his own position was suggested or discussed as a suitable *partie* for him. He disappointed every one by not taking any of them. Nobody could tell why; it certainly was not out of any sentimental regard to the late Mrs. Craven, his wife. He had got on with her comfortably; she was a lady and he a gentleman, and ladies and gentlemen will often live together smoothly and decorously, thanks to the conventions in which they have been trained, and the unwritten laws that guide their outward lives—thanks, too, to the greater facilities they have for living apart, even under the same roof—when,

if they were vulgar folks they might rouse a neighbourhood with their quarrels, or perplex a magistrate to decide which was the most to blame, the wife who had nagged till she was kicked and beaten, or the husband who had kicked and beaten her till she could nag no more. Something like this had been the case with the Rev. George and Mrs. Craven: they had been able to wear their tether loosely, and therefore decently. She had spent a great deal of time in London, and in visiting her friends—a large circle: when she was at home she did all that she considered it incumbent on her as a rector's wife to do; gave the Sunday School children prizes and tea, with buns unlimited; visited the county magnates, and did her best not to let them see how very dull she thought them; went to church twice on Sunday, and tried hard not to go to sleep—her husband's sermons were long and dull, and Mr. Brown's were longer and duller still—gave the old women flannel petticoats, and looked

as if she understood the sleepy Eastshire dialect in which they returned their thanks; treated her husband with perfect politeness, and endeavoured not to let him see how very much he bored her. She was a clever, bright woman, with plenty of animal spirits and good-nature: he was a dull, commonplace man, and she knew it, which he did not. Some credit is due to her for never having let him know the standard at which she rated him. Some credit is due to him for having borne with her flights, figurative and literal, so patiently as he had done. She was a misplaced woman, out of her sphere altogether as the Rev. George Craven's wife. It was not so much that he was a clergyman, but that as a man he was slow, dull, and torpid, following the old cut-and-dry routine which had been the comfortable order of the Church before so many innovations and -isms had come into it on every side. If he had been High she would have been higher still—embroidered stoles, or got

the young ladies of the parish to embroider them, decorated the altar with the best flowers from her garden, hunted up all the little boys in the village who had voices for choristers: his candles should have been longer and his incense stronger, his robes and vestments gayer and brighter than those of any rector in the county if only he had cared for such things, so that she might have a motive in caring for them too. If he had been Evangelical she would have got what excitement she could from his doctrines; there would have been something sensuous and melodramatic in them which would at least have gratified the lower part of her intellectual nature. If he had been Broad, she would have been delighted if he had set his bishop at defiance, preached flat heresy, and incurred a (legal) persecution for his opinions. She would have got quite proud of him if he had only been a martyr, she wouldn't have much cared for what. But the Rev. George had always been provok-

ingly safe; so safe that people said he ought to be a bishop. He was not of the stuff of which martyrs are made: he looked on the High Church shily, on the Evangelical as but a shade better than Dissent; there was no stirring him up to anything. She soon saw that, and made the best of her life accordingly, and ended it just two years before her husband succeeded to the family estates.

In his heart he was not sorry to lose her. He had always been a little afraid of her—afraid that some day or other even the ample liberty he allowed her would not be thought enough, and she would do something that would shock all traditional proprieties. He felt a sense of freedom and safety when he found there was no longer any possibility of her doing so. But he gave her a handsome funeral, and a tablet in the church, and resolved that, having once escaped so well from the quicksands of matrimony, nothing should tempt him to venture on them again. So firmly rooted was this determination, that

even the change in his circumstances, when most men would have thought it incumbent upon them to secure a head to their establishment, and a mother, if possible, to some future heir, failed to shake it. He was a weak-minded man, strong in nothing but obstinacy, and this obstinacy stood him in good, or bad, stead just now, and made him think he was doing a wise thing, when in reality he was committing one long persistent foolishness. For he ought to have married again, and given the estate an heir. It would have saved him, in the end, more trouble than a wife, even if a fac-simile of his first, would have given him. There was an heir, it was true, to the estate, whom his brother had recognized as such : but he was not altogether the person to whom the possessor of an old name and property ought to be too ready to bequeath it.

Frederick, or Fred Craven as everybody that knew him called him, was at college when his uncle Harold died, and his uncle George



succeeded to the estate. He had been wild, as it is mildly called—in plain English, done a few things for which horsewhipping within an inch of his life would not have been too severe a punishment. In the second year of his collegiate career it terminated abruptly in expulsion, and he came home, as if to let his uncle George see that there might be worse evils in life than a restless and excitable wife. He had no particular vocation for anything, unless it might be wickedness, and he almost seemed to cultivate *that* as if it had been one of the fine arts. It is difficult to believe in anything being utterly and wholly given over to evil, but to those who knew Fred Craven such difficulty existed no longer. There was nothing good about him. You couldn't find a single redeeming point, unless it were his personal beauty, and a grace of manner which, when he pleased, amounted to fascination. As a child he had delighted in pets, so called, solely for the purpose of torturing them; as he grew older his

dissipations were marked not merely by ordinary vice, but by motiveless and needless cruelty — as if it were not enough to ruin and disgrace his victims, but that even he must gloat over the ruin and disgrace himself had wrought. He had the same delight in profitless, motiveless wickedness that a monkey has in aimless mischief. It was difficult to believe that he was morally responsible ; that he had sufficient sense of right or wrong to make him so. Was he born with a diseased brain ? Were some of the higher organs that affect our moral capabilities wanting ? And yet he was not only keen enough in everything relating to his own pleasures and interests, but showed in many things an intellectual capacity above the average. He had a turn for literature, and might if he had chosen, so his tutor said, have taken the highest honours at college. More than once he had shown that if he had pleased he could have managed his uncle's estate quite as well as himself or the bailiff. Whatever he

tried to do he could do for a little time, and then he would break off—not through indolence or restlessness, but because some low temptation came in his way, or there was a prospect of indulging his malevolence at some helpless creature's expense. If you could fancy some evil nature embodied in a human form—if you could believe in the old stories of changelings, and think that some earth-demon, or evil-natured gnome, had left its offspring in Fred Craven's cradle, and carried off the kindly human babe, you might comprehend how such a being came into existence. There was some deficiency that no training could supply—something wanting that no culture could impart; it was not the brain but the heart that was in question; but then, with so unsound a heart, let whatever proof be given of mental ability, was it possible that there could coexist a wholly sane and healthy brain?

Mr. Craven, however, never perplexed himself with these questions. Mr. Brown, the

curate, did—he was a little of a metaphysician, and, dull as his sermons were, not without some ability, which however he lacked the gift of making the most of. Some men with half the Curate's talent would have made twice as much display—he made none at all. He was a mild-mannered man, whom one can best describe as inoffensive, not easily roused, nor easily shaken from any purpose he had in view: a good classical scholar, though better versed in German theology than he had any business to be, according to his rector, who read Strauss thus—Satan—and thought that for all good sons of Mother Church it was as safe to touch pitch as those troubled, turbid streams which seemed to be for ever washing some old landmark or another away. But Mr. Brown suited the Rector, and he suited the parish; he was very busy in the schools—very patient with the old women—very ready to listen to what Mr. Craven thought arguments, and which were simply enunciations of his

own opinions, formed upon no other basis than his own likings or prejudices. He was quite ready to undertake what most men would have been a little afraid of—the tutorial charge of Fred Craven when he returned home from college after his expulsion. He was very hopeful about him, being in truth rather an optimist, and inclined to believe the best things of everybody. It was possible the young man had been harshly dealt with. The college authorities were strict, and not inclined to take a lenient view of breaches of discipline; young men *would* make such breaches; their natural spirits would overflow; and they would do foolish things, which older men would be apt to punish as severely as if they were guilty ones.

So said Mr. Brown, who had never been guilty of a breach of discipline of any kind in all his life; the best-behaved and tidiest of boys; the mildest and most orderly of students; but, to have heard him, one would have thought that nothing but a fellow-feel-

ing could have prompted him to speak as leniently as he did of the misdeeds of Fred Craven. He did not speak so, long. Fred proved too much even for his patience; he was so invincibly bad that the Curate gave up his charge in despair, and puzzled himself with the metaphysical disquisitions I have spoken of, and some more practical ones, as to whether the fittest place for his pupil was a reformatory or a lunatic asylum.

The Rector said that as Fred was fit for nothing else, he should go into the army. Fred wished to enter the Guards; that was considered too expensive by his uncle, and Fred declining to risk his precious person in any less aristocratic regiment, he stayed at home, to the scandal of the little town, which was none the better for his presence.

Nominally, he lived half a mile out of it; the Rev. George, at his brother's death, having taken up his residence at the Hall, so that the Rectory at least was preserved from the taint of Fred's presence. But he was far more

in Stretton than at the Hall, favouring its billiard-room with his presence, and lounging over the counters of its pastry-cooks, or the bar of its hotel. And at last he found something to do which called up all his energies for a time, and fell in love out of sheer perversity: a little to annoy his uncle, a little to pester the lady, and a great deal to vex Mr. Brown.

Just at that time Christine and Alethea Ruddfield were very often at Stretton, visiting their aunt. It was only natural that their visits should wake the quiet town up a little. They were not only beautiful girls, but reputed heiresses, and young ladies of a little local importance. Fred Craven thought it due to himself to fall in love with one or other of them. He was not particular which, till accident decided the matter. One day the two were out together, and Fred came across them and ventured on some of the gallantries which he had perhaps found

acceptable to girls in a lower sphere; the girls knew him by name, and wished to know no more; the imp would not, or could not, see how unwelcome he was; when, to their great relief, Mr. Brown made his appearance on the scene—a lonely country lane with a deep ditch and a hedge on either side. He was welcome as a deliverer; no knight of old was ever hailed with more pleasure by wandering damsel than was the Curate by Christine and her sister. And yet he did not look very knightly either: his tawny beard was long, like those of his beloved Germans, but his figure was stout, thick-set, and under the middle size. His face was florid, round, slightly intelligent, and very good-natured. He was thinking as he came up to the group whether Mrs. Shale, who managed the Petticoat Society, could be prevailed on to give twopence a yard more for the raw material next winter, as his favourite old woman had been telling him how badly



the last garment given to her had worn; and mingling with these thoughts was the peroration of his next Sunday's sermon, in which he intended to dwell upon the duty of long-suffering and mutual forbearance.

He was a dull man in every sense of the word, but something made him quick to learn how matters were, when Christine Ruddfield, looking splendidly angry, ranged herself by his side, with Alethea clinging to her. One look at her, and one at his late pupil, was enough to explain all. Mr. Brown's own landlady always said of him that he was as meek as a mouse, and wouldn't hurt a fly, and yet now he felt that if he had had a stout cudgel in his hand he could have found a very unclerical use for it. Perhaps Fred Craven presumed upon the gentleness which he had certainly done his best to try; but he said a word, or looked a look—no one of the parties concerned could ever tell rightly what it was that provoked the punishment that followed—and in another second

the Rev. Gideon Brown had his foot in the air—it was large for his size, and he was always solidly shod—and Fred Craven, after an instant's flight through the air, was lying in the bottom of the right-hand ditch.

Alethea screamed: Mr. Brown looked as if he were not quite clear whether he had done a very wrong or a very right thing. Christine decided for him. "Thank you with all my heart, Mr. Brown. What a fortunate thing it is that the ditches in this part of the country are always so deep and so muddy."

Mr. Brown saw the two girls to Mrs. Timmins's house; then he called at the "Blue Boar," and told them to send a fly to Trott's Lane, where they would most likely find Mr. Frederick Craven in such a state that he would hardly be inclined to walk home. He gave no further explanation, hardly knowing what to say. He wouldn't tell them Fred had met with an accident and tumbled unawares into the ditch. "For it wasn't an accident,"

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he said to himself. "I don't know how I came to do it, but I feel that it must have been on purpose, and that if it were to do over again I should do it."

Then he went to the Rector, and told him that perhaps it would be as well for all parties if he were to give up the curacy. "I've just kicked your nephew into a ditch in Trott's Lane. I can't say I'm sorry for it, for I'm not, but after this it will hardly be pleasant for him and me to be brought too often into contact, and of course I am the one who ought to go. I've sent a fly to bring him home, and I should say it would be advisable to order a hot bath to be in readiness against he is here." Then he recounted all, precisely as it had happened.

Mr. Craven looked perplexed. "He deserved to be kicked," he said, "but it was a pity that you should have had it to do. I don't think a clergyman ought to use his foot any more than his hand in such matters, but of course you can't go; that's not to be

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thought of. I have been making arrangements for his travelling on the Continent. I must hurry them a little more than I have been doing."

But it was not in the Rev. George Craven's nature to hurry over anything. Before matters were definitely settled Fred had exasperated his uncle by requesting his permission to pay his addresses to Miss Christine Ruddfield. It is probable that he would never have gone beyond the boundaries of flirtation had it not been for that *contretemps* in Trott's Lane. He elected to honour Christine with his preference, partly because report already destined her for somebody else, partly to annoy Mr. Brown, whom he suspected of a *tendresse* in that quarter, and partly on account of her openly expressed delight at his chastisement. He would tame the tigress, he said to himself, with a malevolent chuckle at the thought of the magnificent creature crouching humbled, submissive, and spirit-broken at his feet.

But his uncle would not do his part in the taming. His nephew and heir presumptive ought to look higher than Christine Ruddfield, the daughter of a country town brewer. He expressed this very plainly, and it so happened that his opinion reached the ears of Mrs. Timmins, who had been ready to lend herself to the furtherance of Fred's suit, upon his having expressed a due sense of contrition for the impoliteness into which an over-ardent admiration had led him. Christine was as good as engaged ; but as, when Fred first presented himself at North End House, he paid as much attention to one sister as to the other, and more to Mrs. Timmins than to either, the latter was in hopes that Alethea—at that time, in right of her complexion and her profile, the acknowledged beauty of the family—was the magnet that drew him thither. But her pride was in arms when she heard a magnified report of the Rector's disdain of the projected alliance ; and Fred Craven was at once forbidden the house

which, if Christine Ruddfield had had her way, he would never have entered. Soon after, Fred went abroad with a tutor of the strictest principles, who had already done wonders with two or three as apparently hopeless subjects as Fred himself, and who, it was hoped, would fit him at last for his future position. It was not very long, however, before curious tales reached Stretton, and at the end of a year his tutor gave up his charge in disgust—writing to Mr. Craven that he had never undertaken the post of a madman's keeper. Fred was recalled, but he preferred staying where he was; then came rumours that he had met the Miss Ruddfields at Genoa, followed them to Florence, was constantly with them at Rome. The Rev. George was as firmly opposed to such an alliance as ever. Again he summoned Fred, and threatened to, and did, cut off all supplies. Fred appeared not to want any: he must have won money at play, or borrowed it on post-obits, people said; but

money he certainly had. Then came at last a very awkward solution of the manner in which Fred raised funds—a forgery of the name of Sir Thomas Strahan, an old neighbour of his uncle's, then on his travels, was traced to him. He had obtained money, a considerable sum, by another previously, and Sir Thomas was furious. There had been a little litigation between him and Mr. Craven, in which the Rector had had the best of it, both in law and equity. Sir Thomas couldn't forgive his defeat—perhaps not the fact that he deserved to be defeated; and when he found that he had been a “second time plundered,” as he expressed it, lost no time in setting the law on the track of the misdoer.

There was every prospect that Fred Craven would pay a heavy penalty at last, a heavier penalty than a man in a lower station—a penalty that would affect not only himself, but his family; and, failing any other heir to its lands and estates, cause them to revert to

the Crown at his uncle's death. Mr. Craven was fairly frightened now; Fred was the last heir, the very last, and was the line to end in a convicted felon, who could neither inherit the family possessions himself, nor, if he had children, transmit his heritage through his polluted blood to them?

Sir Thomas was at Rome when the intelligence reached Stretton. It was no secret: Sir Thomas had no motives for delicacy, and he showed none. Fred was—anywhere—in safe hiding his uncle hoped, where neither the English detectives nor the Italian *sbirri* could reach him. If Sir Thomas had been accessible, the Rev. George Craven would have humbled himself to the very dust to effect a compromise. The corner of common—it was not worth fifty pounds, manorial rights and all—about which there had been this dispute, should have been given up, and as fair a cantle of the Craven estate as Sir Thomas could be prevailed on to accept, to say



nothing of the restitution of the sum purloined, with whatever addition its defrauded owner might demand in the way of interest. Anything, anything, rather than that the old name should end with such a blot as this. In his agony he thought of hastening at once to Rome, and trying what a personal appeal could do. The elder Mr. Chastelar himself suggested this. "It would be better than writing, and less compromising," said the family lawyer, "and suit the man of old race. Sir Thomas and you are gentlemen both, even if you have been at variance; he ought to stand by his order; the whole county will cry shame upon him if he carries this matter to the issue. See him yourself, promise anything you can with honour; yield anything; he's a hard man, and not too easily moved, but still a man must have the feelings of his kind; it's not like asking him to let off a poacher or a fellow who had broken into his hen-roosts: he will injure himself as well as you, set a bad precedent, which in these revolutionary times

may too easily be followed—not that Sir Thomas will think of *that* so much as he should, being unhappily a Liberal, and rather extreme in his views, but still even he must see how damaging to the class of which he is a member such a step would be. Get the thing quashed if possible, my dear sir; and then, as soon as you return, marry—your dairymaid, if you can find nobody better, so long as she is of good character, and will bring you healthy children.”

“If we get this affair hushed up there will be no need for that,” said the Rector fretfully. Mr. Chastelar was always advising him to marry; hadn’t he enough vexation as it was, without needlessly rushing into more?

“But this *can’t* be hushed up,” said Mr. Chastelar, with a little sternness: “even if people cease to speak of such a thing they will not the less remember it. Even if Mr. Frederick Craven does not stand in the dock, even if the law does not attain him as a felon, and pronounce him deprived of the

civil and political rights which he now possesses, not the less he will have forfeited his place here, and never be recognized by any gentlemen in the county. He may have the lands, but he can't have the position. Is there a single family in the county that would meet him as an equal, or ally itself with him? English gentlemen are not what they were," said Mr. Chastelar, who was something of a Conservative, and looked with a little scorn upon new people and new ways, "but they'll never recognize Mr. Frederick Craven as one of them. He must live abroad, or hide his head in London: Eastshire will be no place for him after this."

"You take too extreme a view of the matter," said the Rector. He had been dreadfully shocked at first himself, and vowed that nothing would ever induce him to see Fred again; but he began now to think that Mr. Chastelar was in the wrong; Fred had behaved very badly, but, good heavens! what was the use of making such a serious

matter of it, after all? The thing would blow over after a bit, as so many foolish things that young men committed always did blow over; what was the use of making the worst of it? Sir Thomas would be brought to hear reason, and accept a very liberal compensation for his loss, with anything he liked in the shape of a peace-offering thrown in. Fred should be kept abroad till the scandal had been forgotten, then a wife should be found for him. He would marry and settle down. He would have sown his wild oats, and what would be the use of gathering the crop and flinging it in his face all his life?

The Rector was an honest man, too; strictly honourable in all his dealings, but he was a little blinded in this matter by his own intense horror of matrimony. And nothing but matrimony would save his house from utter dishonour if Fred were convicted, or, failing conviction, only escaped with a fatally damaged repute. And he had not that keen sense of honour, that instinctive avoidance of

everything low, and mean, and base, which seemed inborn in Mr. Chastelar, and which, to all appearance, and contrary to all general belief, the legal training had only perfected and refined. If the Rev. George Craven had been a tradesman, a farmer, a mechanic, or a working man, there is no doubt but that he would have filled his position very well, been perfectly respectable, and quite as honest as the average specimens of his class. Having been trained in all decorous ways and rules, he was something more, and in manners as in position conventionally a gentleman. But Mr. Chastelar would have been one in any case; if he had followed the plough or stood at the forge, he would still have shone pre-eminent amongst other labourers, while Mr. Craven would have been undistinguishable from the herd. You could not look at the two men without seeing the difference. Both were of the same age, had had much the same training, first at St. Ewald's Grammar School, and then at Ox-

ford ; both moved in much the same circle, looked at many things from the same standpoint, and perhaps the intellectual horizon of either was equally limited, and yet you felt there was an unlikeness between the two, and that unlikeness seemed constantly displaying itself in minor traits and peculiarities : just as physically they were alike, and yet unlike—the same height, the same grey hair, the same slight stoop in the shoulders ; at the first glance you would have said they might have been brothers, at the next, you would have said the same race could never have produced them. The Rev. George Craven, with his broad face, his clear skin, and his sturdy massive frame and large heavy features, seemed about as fair a type of the Anglo-Saxon race as can be met with in our English gentry of to-day. Mr. Chastelar, with his aquiline features, the indefinable air of blood and race pervading all his thin spare frame, and his manner, which was composed and reserved almost to stateliness,

presented the Norman aspect at its best and kindest. Looking at him, it was easy to understand how it was that Mr. Chastelar possessed the confidence of half the gentlemen within twenty miles of Arkleigh.

The Rector and he had never differed before, but there seemed likely to be a difference now; Mr. Chastelar could not agree with his client in the view he took of Fred Craven's offence. The other went peevishly over all the arguments which I have stated, winding up with—"It will all come right in time, Chastelar; the boy will settle down, and his wife will keep him in order, and you'll look after his affairs just as you look after mine now; you or your son after you, and this affair will be forgotten, and perhaps act as a warning to him, and keep him straight for the future."

"Thank you, Mr. Craven, but that prospective honour is one I cannot accept, either for myself or my son. If ever Mr. Frederick Craven is master here, we must

decline to be charged with his legal confidences. We don't like criminal cases. I'm afraid neither Launcelot nor I would have shone in Old Bailey practice, and I expect, in refusing not only to have the care of his interests, but to enter his doors, or be favoured with his acquaintance, we should only be manifesting the same spirit that will actuate every other gentleman in the county. I trust you will remember that whatever advice I have given you in this matter has been dictated by personal regard to yourself, not out of the slightest consideration for Mr. Frederick Craven."

Mr. Chastelar seemed bent upon driving his client into marriage, and the client seemed determined not to be driven. He would humble himself to Sir Thomas Strahan, let him (figuratively) put his foot upon his neck as much as he pleased—it would be a great deal better the foot of Sir Thomas should be there than the matrimonial yoke. But he was saved all such humbling by the news that



reached him of Fred's death. He had been tracked to a *chalet* in Schaffhausen one summer evening. The detectives who were on his track meant to seize him at the earliest dawn, and in the night a fire arose which burned the cottage to the ground, and, it was believed by the detectives, and every one in the village too, Mr. Frederick Craven with it. His bedstead was found charred to ashes—a heap of tinder for his clothes—a little melted gold was all that remained of his watch chain and ornaments. It was very shocking, very dreadful, but still, was it not best after all? There could be no prosecution now: that heap of indistinguishable ashes, and the two or three bones, so charred that it was almost impossible to say whether or not they were human, could never be arraigned in any court for felony. The fire had burned away the blot from his race, the stain from his shield. He was gone, but the evil which he had done had happily gone with him.

In his heart Mr. Craven felt thankful; he would not say so openly, partly because it would have seemed a sin against the ties of kindred, partly because it would have been owning that Mr. Chastelar was in the right when he considered Fred Craven's offence inexpressible. Mr. Chastelar felt thankful, and made no secret that he was so; solemnly and gravely, he said it was a thing to be grateful for. It seemed that the Cravens were to die out now—well, that would be God's doing; they would not be blotted out by man's crime. He told his son that he would never say another word to Mr. Craven about marrying again, and Mr. Craven, who was invincibly bent upon going the opposite way to that which any one wanted to lead him, now began in his turn to talk of it himself. It was a sacrifice, he said, but if the good of his house demanded it, he would perform that sacrifice. How else, now poor Fred was gone, should an heir be found in his place? It was a disagreeable necessity, but then it

*was* a necessity, and he told Mr. Chastelar he should lose no time in complying with it. "As if the real necessity," said Mr. Chastelar to his son, "did not exist in the life of that young profligate." But, thinking it well that county families should be perpetuated, he said nothing to dissuade his client from the voluntary martyrdom he contemplated, when, within three months of Fred Craven's death, it appeared that there was no necessity for such martyrdom at all.

There was a distant cousin, Mr. Russel Craven, a vicar in a far-away nook in Cornwall—a man who had married rather late in life, not having given up his fellowship till he was above forty ; and to this cousin, after twenty years of childless marriage, a son was born, just at the very time when an heir was so needful to the Cravens. Mr. Craven was jubilant ; Mr. Chastelar, in his grave and more dignified way, was almost equally so ; even the fact that the mother died a few hours after the child's birth was looked upon

by them as a very slight drawback to the gratification that an heir had been given to Craven Hall and its demesne. Mr. Craven himself wrote to his cousin to condole with him upon the death of his wife—he supposed he would expect to be condoled with—people had condoled with him, and therefore it was to be believed that widowers were objects of pity—and then he congratulated him upon the birth of his son, an event, he assured the Rev. Russel Craven, in which he was as much interested as himself. He was a liberal man in money matters, and the Cornish vicar's income was not large, therefore he intimated a wish that when the child's education commenced, he should be brought up as his heir—any additional outlay, either for that or any other purpose required by his future position, he should only be too happy to meet; and he summed up by requesting that in the event of his surviving Mr. Russel Craven—not an improbable event, as he was eight years his junior—he should be appointed

the boy's guardian. And as he closed that letter he felt a free man—there was no longer any occasion for him to become a martyr; but he took all the credit to himself of the martyrdom, seeing how willing he had been to incur it. His house was saved, and he had not had to sacrifice himself.

Everything turned out in a satisfactory manner. The Cornish vicar died at threescore years and ten, leaving his son, a boy of seven years old, to the sole guardianship of his cousin, and the boy, a fine promising child, had now been for two years domiciled at Craven Hall, with every prospect of growing up a much worthier successor to its present possessor than the late Frederick Craven had ever seemed likely to be. The Rector was very proud of the boy, and he felt as if he had a right to be proud of him—as if every pleasant trait and dawning talent in the child was only another bonus given by Heaven to reward him for the sacrifice he had resolved] to make for the destinies of his race.

## CHAPTER XV.

### CHRISTINE'S PLANS FOR JERRY.

CHRISTINE RUDDFIELD lay awake half the night after Jerry's arrival at North End House, thinking how best she should tame and civilize this little Arab. It was not so much a desire to repay her brother's debt to him, or to relieve him of the responsibility he seemed to feel that debt laid on him, as an intense interest in the boy himself. She liked Jerry: *gamin*, pickpocket, beggar, graceless, shameless, truthless as he was, the boy had pluck, endurance, and some sense of gratitude in him. All the Bohemian in her sympathised with him. But, besides this, she was conscious of that little superstitious feeling regarding him which I have already

mentioned—a superstition that was so much allied to tenderness and pity that we dare not ridicule or blame it. If she saved this one, might not some other reach out a hand to the child, if still living, of her own blood, who might be growing up uncared for and untaught, or if taught at all, only that which was vile and evil, and which might fit it by and by to be its father's partner in crime—the only use to which he would care to turn it ?

She came down full of her purpose, and sent for Jerry. She had simply told him the day before, that he was much too tired to proceed to London, and must stay at her house till he had thoroughly rested himself. Jerry was content ; he sat and talked to Claude, and heard her read to him ; he was civil to the maids ; only took what was given him for his meals, and went to bed quietly enough when he was told. The fact is, his long walk had exhausted his energies, and he had none to spare for the annoyance of any one. He washed himself well the next morn-

ing, and came with well-blacked boots and well-brushed clothes, looking as tidy as circumstances permitted. One of the maids, at Claude's instance, had mended his jacket, and as, luckily for his comfort, he had lost his hat, he was very well satisfied with his appearance. So was Miss Ruddfield ; Jerry's improved looks were decidedly a step in the right direction. She herself was looking as she always did of a morning, fresh, fair, and genial. Jerry glanced approvingly on her.

"Wouldn't she just cut a shine in London," he thought. "My eye ! wouldn't I just like to see her in dimonds and feathers a-goin' to Court. There's ne'er a one on 'em would come up to her."

Christine read his admiration in his eyes, and was glad of it. If she read Jerry aright, a handsome face would go a long way with him, and she felt quite glad this morning that in spite of her wakeful night she was looking her best. One way or another, Jerry must be conquered and fascinated.



"How nice you're looking, Jerry!" she said. "As fresh as a rose, and quite clean and smart. Do you know I've been thinking about you half the night."

Jerry grinned with delight: he appreciated the compliment as much as it deserved: then the suspicious caution which his training had made almost second nature inspired him with some misgivings, and he answered, "You aren't a goin' to giv' me to the beak for hookin' it with these togs on? I wouldn't ha' done it, but I couldn't get the others. I'd a precious sight sooner have had them as Miss Claude's guv'ner guv me."

"No, I'm not going to give you to the beak," said Miss Ruddfield, who knew enough of *argot* to understand Jerry perfectly. "I want to keep you from ever going before the beak again, if I can. Do you know, I don't think you'd find it so hard to be good if you only made up your mind to try."

"If they'd only let a cove alone, he might; there'd be a chance for him; but ever since I

cum down to this blessed place I've had one and another a-pitchin' into me till I've felt as if it was no good a-tryin'. I was all right, you know, as long as I was with Miss Claude and her guv'ner an' Mother Gibbs, but they're sich a rummy lot down this part; Seven Dials ain't nothin' to 'em."

"Well, you shall stop with Miss Claude now; she is going to stay with me for some time; her papa will leave for London in a few days, but she will remain. You'd like to be near her, and I'm sure she would be very sorry to part with you. I want a boy about the place—you could clean boots, couldn't you? I should think you would rather like doing mine and Miss Claude's."

"I'd do 'em first-rate," said Jerry; "I allus did Soapy Sam's whenever he was comin' the 'spectable dodge,—tryin' to do the broken-down parson, an' come over the ladies with tracts an' sichlike: oh yes, I'd do *them* easy enough;" and he looked with the air of a connoisseur at the pretty little foot that

peeped out beneath Christine Ruddfield's drapery.

"And I suppose you could clean knives? You might help my maids nicely if you could," said Miss Christine. She thought that perhaps the best way would be to let Jerry see that she had something for him to do—that in his progress and improvement he might help others as well as himself; school teaching alone she fancied would hardly be sufficient outlet for his energies—Jerry was a subject with whom the half-time treatment would perhaps be the best.

"I can do that, jest," said Jerry. "I did 'em at the lodgin' house I used to hang out at whenever I'd been in luck and could pay tup-pence for a turn-in. Didn't I put a shine on 'em! Once Bill Griggs said he could do 'em quicker nor me, but I soon showed him the differ. Then he went on a-jawin' till at last I told him if he didn't hold his gab I'd stick him: I'd got the biggest knife on 'em all in my hand. Bill hooked it, an' didn't

come nigh me for a week; he said I looked jest as if I was a-goin' to do it, but Bill always wor 'a flat, he wor."

"And you might help my gardener," said Miss Ruddfield. "I am so fond of my garden; I like to work in it myself at times. I think Simon and I might teach you to be of great use there."

"Odd if I wasn't," said Jerry with a sharp nod of the head.

"Then there would be your lessons—now I think an evening school would suit you best at first, Jerry; you wouldn't care to spend too much time over your books—a clever boy like you. I fancy somehow you are clever, Jerry,"—Jerry gave an affirmative nod to this,—  
"would learn as much in an hour or two as another in a day. I thought of your going to an evening school, and then in the day-time you might read to me a little—I rather like being read to when I am at work; if you take pains you'll soon be able to do that."

"All right," said Jerry, "I'll read a'most as well as Miss Claude afore long."

"And we'll send for your other clothes, and let the people at the Grey Coat School have these back ; so that we sha'n't be afraid of any unpleasantness about them, eh, Jerry ? Now come with me into the garden, and let us see if you can't weed an onion-bed."

END OF VOL. I.



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